Silver Lined Bones

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Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	방탄소년단 | Bangtan Boys | BTS
Relationships:	Jeon Jungkook/Kim Taehyung | V, Min Yoongi | Suga/Park Jimin
Characters:	Jeon Jungkook, Kim Taehyung | V, Park Jimin (BTS), Min Yoongi | Suga, Kim Namjoon | RM, Kim Seokjin | Jin, Jung Hoseok | J-Hope
Additional Tags:	Dragons, Arranged Marriage, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Warlocks, Fantasy, Alternate Universe - Medieval, (kinda), Slow Burn, Hurt/Comfort, Bickering, Fluff and Angst, Happy Ending, Blood and Violence, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, (mostly implied or referred to), Physical Abuse, (same), Minor Character Death, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Dragon Kim Taehyung | V, Prince Jeon Jungkook, Kim Taehyung | V is a Little Shit, Jeon Jungkook is a Brat, Hurt Kim Taehyung | V, Kim Taehyung | V is Bad at Feelings, Sweet Jeon Jungkook, Jeon Jungkook Needs a Hug, Protective Kim Taehyung | V, Protective Jeon Jungkook, Powerful Kim Taehyung | V, BAMF Jeon Jungkook, Kim Taehyung | V is Whipped, Jeon Jungkook is Whipped, Dom/sub Undertones, Dom Kim Taehyung | V, Sub Jeon Jungkook, Kidnapping, Touch-Starved Jeon Jungkook, Non-Sexual Intimacy
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Silver Lined Bones

by PluiePlume

Summary

To solidify the Accords signed between humans, warlocks and dragonborns, Taehyung is set to marry the heir of the most prominent human dynasty: Jeon Jungkook. Everything would be fine for Taehyung if Jungkook was not: 1) human, 2) such a damn *brat*, and 3) hiding so many secrets.

However, a sinister event threatens the tentative peace and dragonborns as a whole. Nothing is what it seems to be, and Taehyung and Jungkook will have to work together to find the cure to a growing tragedy.

OR

Taehyung regrets his life choices as he accepts an arranged marriage with a brazen human prince who *loves* to push every single one of Taehyung's buttons. Jungkook, on the other hand, basks in his newfound freedom.

Notes

!!Please read!!

1) The graphic depiction of violence mostly only happens in specific chapters that will be tagged accordingly in the notes, but I thought it wise to still give the story a general graphic depiction tag!! As for the emotional/physical abuse, it will be mostly implied and referred to a little bit here and there, but if/when it ever goes beyond that, it will again be put as additional tags before the start of the chapter delving into it. It also won't happen between Taekook or between BTS' members.

2) This story was originally written for the BTS Dragon Fest, however since the twitter account disappeared, I was worried of the collection being closed, and so I removed SLB from the fest's collection. You can still find the original prompt bellow!!

3) I try to give additional tags for each chapter when necessary so please make sure to check those just in case!! To the prompter if you see this, I hope you enjoy the story and thank you so much for the very inspiring prompt 🤍 Comments are always very very much loved so don't hesitate to leave some hehe 🤍

Now, enough babbling and have fun reading the first chapter of this (already but soon to be more) monstrous story hehe 🤍

❧ Twitter

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Prompt:

Humans and dragons have been on bad terms for centuries. To put an end to this rivalry a union is suggested between human prince Jungkook and Taehyung the son of the dragons' leader.

Author has freedom to come up with the reasons behind the rivalry and the rest of the world building!

Please include: a lot of bickering, fluff and protective taekook (them being oblivious/stubborn about their feelings is very much appreciated), smut (no preference), light jealousy
DO NOT WANT: mcd, heavy angst, cheating, dubcon and open/sad ending

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: Silver Lined Bones by SeverinLee

Chapter 1: A Plague's Fare

Chapter Summary

> Taehyung hears about the Terrible News of his upcoming marriage, then he learns an even worse news, and everything still manages to go downhill from that point onward.

Chapter Notes

> I present to you a monster fic of mine that I lost control over from the get go, I hope you enjoy 🤍
>
> ❧ Twitter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If I may, Mother, I would rather tear my own wings and feed them to myself than be wedded with this man.”

“Son.” Dahee makes a reprimanding click of her tongue. “You’ll be fine.”

“Of all men populating Aurora, not only have you chosen one from Amaris, a *human*, but also the heir of the Jeon dynasty.” Taehyung meets his mother’s gaze, his own hardening at her stubbornness. “The son and future prince of the very empire that had attempted then nearly *succeeded* in expunging dragonborns from the world.”

“You speak my mind, Son,” Junhyun says, the rotund man sipping from the mug of coffee he had fixed himself minutes ago. “I have been trying to sway you mother toward a more befitting suitor for you, all in vain.”

“You two.” Dahee peers at her mate who rests the bottom of his cup on his round belly. “This rivalry with humans has lasted for far too long. The Great War occurred *centuries* ago, long before either of us was born. While we still suffer its repercussions, it is tamed by the peace treaty. *By the Accords.* We must move forward. Learn forgiveness and acceptance. This association with the Jeon dynasty will be a prime example of how humans and dragonborns can, not solely live next to one another, but unite as a thriving nation.”

“Dragonborns don't need peace. Not with humans,” Taehyung snips, his right leg jutting up and down. “We have peace among our peers and that is all that should matter.”

Dahee shakes her head. “You spend too much time with your grandfather. He has corrupted your mind.”

“My dear, our son—”

“Will go through this marriage as he had agreed upon,” Dahee declares with stern firmness. “Taehyung had found no trouble being wedded in such fashion when we had approached him about this subject in the past. The mutual dowry that will be granted to our family and the Jeon family cannot be neglected because of archaic worldviews.”

“An arranged marriage is a fine endeavor with anyone but a human. *Jeon's* son at that,” Taehyung emphasizes because his mother seems to have yet fully encompassed the horror of her inane proposal.

“A lot is to learn from humans."

“Like what? Betrayal? Vanity? Or perhaps they could teach us how to entirely erase a race to satisfy an insatiable greed.”

Junhyun makes a face; a grimace that is half in agreement, half in denial, yet fully silent as he prefers to munch on the pastries he and his mate had baked earlier this morning.

“As I said many, *many* times, forgiveness must be given in order to grow. Vengeance is regressive, Taehyung. It would do you well to remember this.” Dahee pushes herself up. “Until then, if you must find me, I will be out with our hunting squadrons. Winter is arriving, and we must stock up on meat.”

“Be safe, Darling,” Junhyun smiles, earning himself a peck on the mouth.

“I always am.” Dahee aims a pointed look toward Taehyung.

Then, and without any further ado, she vacates the dining room, the door closing behind her back.

A silence stretches between Taehyung and his father. The latter busies himself with dipping his croissant into his coffee. It’s when Junhyun’s teeth clasp around the pastry that he peers up, his eyes roundening at his son’s scrutiny.

“Guessing you won’t help me change her mind."

“You and I both know such things rarely exist. Your mother is obstinate.”

“Could you, at the very least, side with me in a less quiet manner?”

“I had, Son.” Junhyun has this look in his eyes that easily translates as a forlorn surrender. “However I found it wise to not push further as I am not looking forward to an early death.”

“She’s your wife,” Taehyung objects and he purses his lips when his father pats his arm with a bright smile.

“Exactly, my son.” Junhyun rises from his chair, taking his cup with him.

“You’re a coward. She has you wrapped around her finger.” Taehyung bites back a smile when his father enthusiastically nods.

“Happily so!” Air leaves Taehyung’s lungs for a split second when his father smacks his large hand between his shoulder blades. “Your mother and I were in a marriage akin to yours. I fell in love at first sight with her brilliant mind, fierceness and otherworldly beauty. She hated me. Or rather disliked me. It took time for her to come around, however she eventually did and—”

“I know the story, Dad.”

“What I mean to say is to not give up on hope. Your marriage may be an unexpected good omen.”

“It’s not marriage in itself that bothers me. As I said years ago, I don't mind it. It’s *who* I will marry.”

“As much as I understand the reasons behind your anger, I also understand your mother’s motives behind her faith. Dahee’s care and ambition is why she makes such a well respected leader amongst others. She has her family and her people’s best interests in mind, and more. She has always wanted to be closer to humans and grow alongside them.”

“For political matters only.”

“You and I know that isn’t true. She cares about humans. She has friends in Amaris and other cities in the west.”

“Let me guess.” Taehyung leans back against his chair and tilts his head up to meet his father’s gaze. “Those humans befriended her because they gain something in return: money, influence, knowledge and whatnot, either way information that they will inevitably use against us.”

Junhyun frowns. “You *are* spending too many days in her father’s lair. You're starting to sound like him.”

“Speaking of.” Taehyung slides his chair back to walk around it and toward the exit door. “I have to see him.”

“Remember to be there at 8 pm for dinner, Son.”

“Yeah.”

Taehyung briskly strides outside the dining room and through the hallways, passing by the living room.

Taehyung has always loved his home. The place is vast, with open spaces and ceilings high enough to accommodate dragonborns if they wish to bring forth their wings or tail while in their human form. The house is mostly made out of sturdy wood of all kinds, accentuated by bay windows and haphazard touches of green with the various plants arranged here and there.

Now, however, the comfort it would usually provide yet fails to after the argument with his mother prompts Taehyung to vacate the place.

The moment he steps foot in the garden surrounding the house, Taehyung tugs at the pool of arcane residing within his chest. A gust of grey wind wraps around him, and the familiar warmth is next. Soon, his body changes, the human leaving place to the dragon.

The process is and has always been painless, like adorning a new suit, one albeit much more scaly, large and deadly than the other.

Not wasting another second, and angsty to leave the ground, Taehyung propels himself up, the grass rustling at the powerful down sweeps of his wings of a pearly iridescent white. He soars further away from his home and he remains afloat high aloft the canopy, his gaze raking across the view below him.

Being a dragonborn is a legacy that Taehyung wears with pride. Everything that it brings in its path is enchanting and breathtaking: whether it being the prospect of transforming into a full fledged majestic dragon, or having the possibility to glide through the sky and clouds, reveling in the boundless freedom. It's still an occurrence Taehyung has not gotten used to: this chance to be allowed to coexist among other aerial creatures, like the flocks of birds that accompany him and migrate this or that direction.

He's not the sole dragonborn airborne. Thunders of them drift above the tree lines of the forest and the outskirts of Vanae on the far east, the main town in Taehyung's family's land. He sees families with parents guiding their wyrmlings through the sky while some prefer to enjoy the ride on their parent's back, their wings too underdeveloped to carry them.

Taehyung's wings thrust him near his destination.

He soon reaches the broad mountain range spanning across the horizon. He turns sideways and flies toward an isolated cave in the rocky hill.

Taehyung's grandfather on his mother's part of the family has always been a recluse man. Since his retirement from his role as Vanae's leader after his daughter had taken over, he had chosen to live away from most in favor of a peace that Taehyung envies when reminded of the current circumstances of his visit.

A roar bellows in the quietude that Taehyung echoes with one of his own, signaling his presence to his grandfather.

Minutes later, and only after receiving a loud rumble of confirmation, Taehyung flattens his wings against his flanks to dive inside the lair. The tunnel is wide, accommodating the gargantuan size of Taehyung's dragon form. The lair that it leads to is even wider, to a point where it could easily fit a dozen fully grown dragons.

There, at the middle, stands a bulky man with short, black hair who appears to be concocting what Taehyung can only describe as a slimy sludge.

Taehyung's mood that had spoiled pacifies at the scene — even if he may become the test subject of yet another potion prepared by the healing dragonborn.

Taehyung's wings flutter as he lowers himself on the makeshift of a landing platform, and after deftly coming to rest on the flat rock formation, he adorns his human self again, clothes reappearing at once.

"You better have a good reason to be bothering me in my sleep."

"You seemed awake?" Taehyung perplexedly says. He jumps down in the lair, a round room that forms the living and dining room, as well as the kitchen and bedroom.

Minsoo turns around to glare at Taehyung, enough for the latter to notice his grandfather's bloodshot left eye. "I sleep with my eye open, kid."

Taehyung snorts and marches toward one of the tables that isn't littered by knickknacks of vials, pots, books and other miscellaneous goods that Minsoo hoards. "Have you slept at all recently?"

Minsoo waves a dismissive hand. "Why are you here?"

“My wedding.” Taehyung slumps down on an uncomfortable, frayed chair that surprisingly does not fall apart under his weight.

Minsoo’s lips curve around a curious smile, a glint of amusement flicking in his eye before it vanishes as he faces his workstation. “Have you finally met your betrothed?”

Taehyung scoffs. “No.”

“Why so damn petulant?”

“You wouldn’t be able to guess who my soon-to-be husband is.” Taehyung softens his tone so as to not ignite his grandfather’s temper, a flaw that Dahee had gained from the old man and that had then been — regrettably — passed onto Taehyung.

“Is it a *woman?”* Minsoo stresses the last word with offended vehemence, well aware of Taehyung’s preferences.

Taehyung can’t reign in the laughter escaping his mouth. “No."

“S’what I thought. Then it can’t be that bad. Unless it's Kang's son, Jisung. Dimwit of a kid wouldn’t be able to add one plus one if you asked him to. I had asked him once and his eyes had taken the light of the emptiest void.”

“It’s not him.”

“Who? Youngjae? Minho? By the Elders, if it’s Woobin—”

“Jungkook.”

Minsoo swivels on his left foot, the prosthetics of his right leg whirring when he does. Taehyung sees the soot covering the right half of his grandfather’s face, surely the results of a potion gone terribly wrong. Features etched in his usual scowl, Minsoo snatches a rag to roughly wipe his face, the attempt at making himself more presentable only serving to spread the grim.

“Who in hell is that?”

“The heir of the Jeon dynasty."

Minsoo flings the dirty rag on the workstation, a tad too close to the cauldron filled with a boiling substance. He walks forward and in a few long strides punctuated by the clack of the foot of his metal prosthetic, he stops in front of Taehyung.

Minsoo has always been an intimidating man, mostly due to his abrasive and blunt personality, but also because of his large stature, rivaling with Junhyun’s. However where Taehyung’s father is overweight with rotund but powerful muscles hidden under the chubbiness, Minsoo is squared with a burly and athletic strength that ripples beneath the loose garments.

So Taehyung reclines in his chair when Minsoo looms over him, the old man's frown aggravated to a glower. “You better be lying to me, Kim Taehyung.”

“I’m not. Mom and Dad summoned me this morning to tell me more about my betrothed. We’ll properly discuss this around dinner tonight."

“You are *not* marrying one of those human bastards, let alone Jeon's son. Your parents must have gone mad and forgotten what has happened to us. To *you.”*

“That’s what I told her,” Taehyung grumbles, vindicated by his grandfather’s fury.

Minsoo steps away to save the rag from burning to a crisp, tossing the remainder of it on the ground. “Do you want to marry Jeon's son?”

“Of course not," Taehyung snips. "They're definitely concocting some kind of plan to overthrow us or stab us in the back one way or another. Their son must be some sort of bait, at best. An instigator at worst.”

Minsoo hums and he strokes his beard, the low rumble echoing through the lair. “Your father has developed the backbone of a damn hatchling. He would break his own spine if it meant keeping Dahee happy.”

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “You raised her to be as hard-headed as you are.”

“A mistake.” Minsoo lifts the heavy cauldron to unceremoniously drop it on the ground, some of its now turned teal sludge spilling over. “Come here and give a hand to your old man instead of sitting in that chair wallowing in your despair,” Minsoo says. Taehyung purses his lips but obeys. “Have to fill those bottles.” Minsoo nods at a row of glass vials. “Then I’ll take you to a new spot I found. You’ll like it.”

Taehyung gazes at his grandfather with skepticism. “Will I really like it? Or are you saying that because you want to see me struggle to fit through whatever cave you’ll be taking us to?" He tries to harden his tone with faux annoyance but it’s rendered useless by a bubbling anticipation. He remembers the numerous occasions where he has gone out with Minsoo, the two often spending time flying and exploring together, where some of those outings would sporadically end with them finding themselves at the core of a dragonborn’s wrath when his grandfather would decide to pester one of his old friends.

A cheeky smile dances on Minsoo’s mouth, his golden eye full of mirth. “You’ll see, kid.”

“What about Mom?” Taehyung worries, surprised that Minsoo would let the issue of the marriage fall off so promptly.

“We’ll speak to her tonight during dinner. Perhaps the both of us can change her mind.”

“No.”

“Mom—”

“I said no.” Dahee’s glare snaps from her father to Taehyung.

“You don’t seem to grasp the dangers you will bring upon our family by allowing a Jeon to marry your son,” Minsoo interjects, the haphazard wrinkles betraying his age deepened by his furrowed brows.

“You have raised me to be welcoming and loving to others,” Dahee retorts, setting her chopsticks on her empty plate.

“To our people. Our *kin*,” Minsoo spits. He doesn’t raise his voice, per say, but it still booms through the dining room. “Humans cause nothing but pests of all kinds. Me, of all dragonborns, knows that.”

Dahee visibly deflates at this addition as she lowers her gaze on her glass of wine. Taehyung glances at the scar marring the angle of Minsoo's jaw: it cleaves up to the forehead, the right eye socket deprived of its organ.

“Must I remind you that humans have decimated my family’s family among dozens of thousands more? Your own ancestors?” Minsoo's hand flies to what remains of his amputated right leg, fingers squeezing to ease down the quivers Taehyung can notice.

“I know what was done to dragonborns,” Dahee's mellowed gaze meets Minsoo’s, “however I, and other members of the Council, believe we can learn to—”

“This marriage and any other the Council will agree with will provide an effortless way for humans to slither inside our politics.”

“Yes. However it’ll be done in a controlled environment where what knowledge the humans will earn will not only be reciprocated with their own, but also wisely chosen by *us* . It’s an exchange, Father. Our Elders have worked themselves to the bone to ensure the survival of our people, hence the Accords made after the Great War, but it is not enough anymore for many reasons.”

“Dragonborns don’t need more than that. All humans know is plundering, killing and war. I will not allow my grandson to—”

“You seem to forget that you are not part of the Council anymore since you have resigned and allowed me to take leadership in your place.” Dahee tilts her head up with poise. “You do not have a say in this matter.”

“What about me, then?” Taehyung shoots. All eyes turn on him.

“Is the race of your betrothed the only reason why you are so averse to this union?” Dahee fires back.

Taehyung can feel the ire radiating from his grandfather, scathing and growing. “As I said before, if my betrothed is a dragonborn, I have no problem with the marriage.”

“If so, we shall proceed with the wedding negotiations,” Dahee says with finality.

“This is madness!” Minsoo’s fist slams on the table. The cutlery and plates rattle together.

“What is madness is how measly, ancient, and *bigoted* your mind is.” Dahee’s eyes shift to those of her dragon counterpart in reflection to her father’s. “As dreadful and tragic as the Great War had been for dragonborns, remaining stuck in this old age segregation will serve *us* or humans no good in the long run.” She rises to lean forward on her hands and look down at her father. “Allowing humans inside the Council will grant us more land to hunt and live on. *Expansion* . It’ll give us access to their science, medicine, influence and more. Possibly including their warlocks. All that dragonborns need in order to survive and thrive toward a prolific future.”

Exhausted by the winded argument, Taehyung drags a palm down his face with a deep sigh. “I understand what you aim to achieve, Mother, but it remains incredibly hazardous. It could backfire at any moment.”

“And perhaps it will, but you cannot know that.” Dahee straightens up and brushes the front of the dress shirt soiled with smudges of dirt. “Nonetheless, nothing is set in stone yet. A meeting is arranged with the Jeon family. In the meantime, I would like to speak with my son *only.* ”

“Of course, Darling,” Junhyun says.

“Spineless,” Minsoo snips with a scornful peep at Junhyun.

“And belly full. I refuse to argue with a full belly,” Junhyun deflects.

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung peers up at his mother. Catching onto the underlying request, he leaves the table as she does and trails behind her. The two of them make their way to the door. Dahee pries it open, allowing her son to pass by the threshold first.

“I’m sorry,” Dahee says once out of earshot from Junhyun and Minsoo. “I do not mean to be so persistent.”

“Do you not?” The quip earns Taehyung a playful slap on the arm.

Dahee grows silent as she curls a hand around Taehyung’s left arm, guiding him throughout a series of corridors. Taehyung has an inkling that more is to be shared. His expectations turn into confusion when they halt in front of the basement’s door.

“Are you truly opposed to the idea of marrying the Jeon family’s son?”

Taehyung’s cheeks puff around a huff of air.

He has never been against the concept of arranged marriage, a rare affair that can sporadically happen between dragonborns, and that he knows to be common in human lands. Taehyung had never envisioned finding a mate to begin with. This kind of love does not matter to him, but he has *standards*, so to say. One, more specifically, that will not be met if he proceeds with his family’s association with the Jeon’s.

“I don’t trust humans,” Taehyung chooses to answer.

“I know, Son, but we should learn to.”

They climb down the stairs, the basement’s walls and grounds made of rocks that Taehyung’s slippers grate against.

“They’ll turn against us. They always find a way and reason to,” Taehyung adds as they advance deeper and walk through a series of corridors. “Plus they largely outnumber us and have access to weapons able to take dragons down, including warlocks.”

“However they won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because they haven’t hurt us for centuries.”

“That’s… That’s naïve thinking.”

“Perhaps,” Dahee concedes with a small smile, “but we need their help as much as they need ours.”

“We don’t need humans’ or warlocks’ help.” When Taehyung is met with the disappearance of his mother’s smile, replaced instead by pinched lips and a glaze in her eyes, he immediately understands that more to be said. “Mom, what aren’t you telling me?”

“There is a concern of high importance you must know, one that the Elders have allowed me to share with you only.”

“Why only me?”

“I’m not entirely sure."

Taehyung studies the familiar heavy door they have paused in front of.

It’s one that he has seen a few times in his childhood when he would launch himself into a journey in the basement, or a game of hide and seek with his grandfather and Jimin.

Taehyung has never seen this door opened in the past.

When he had been young, he had conjured plethora of theories as to what it may withhold: heaps of gems, spell books or other arcanic trinkets, and he had wondered if perhaps some ancient dragon eggs dating millions of years ago were kept hidden as well. But Taehyung had grown, and with it the memory of this door had vanished. Up till now, where he’s confronted with those same queries once more.

“The concern resides in our land and has been relocated under our property, so to speak, due to our family presiding over Vanae,” Dahee resumes. “You are to become Vanae's leader too, so they must judge it wise to inform you about this matter. However I believe these reasons pale in comparison to what the Oracle must have seen, whatever it may be."

“ *The Oracle?”* Taehyung echoes with surprise.

The Oracle is the most ancient dragonborn known to dragons and humankind alike. Taehyung has heard legend after legend about them; how they had predicted diseases, catastrophes, wars and other ailments; so his curiosity swells at the mention of this mythical being.

Dahee nods in affirmation. “They were the one to instruct me to keep what you will see next a secret, and to keep it safe in our basement. Only them, the Elders, and I, are aware of what lies beyond this door.”

“How do you—”

Dahee produces a flame on her index finger, the fire flickering at the faint gust of wind seeping through the space around the door’s hinges. Then, and with an assurance honed by years, she burns a trail of strange letters into the wood of the door, one after another, soon forming a circle of characters. *Runes* . Draconic and ancient ones.

The door opens, and what Taehyung sees next does not come close to what his imagination had envisioned.

“Well...” Taehyung peers ahead, bemused. “Lo' and behold, another tunnel. I was expecting something a little more exciting with the secrecy surrounding this door.”

“Son.” Dahee frowns. “Levity has no place in this matter.”

“And what is this matter, exactly?” Taehyung holds onto the torch his mother hands him and allows her to ignite the cloth surrounding the tip doused in oil. “You make it sound like a cataclysm is about to happen."

Dahee tugs Taehyung forward. “May as well.”

“That’s not worrying at all…”

The tunnel, unlike the previous ones of the basement area, doesn’t seem man-made nor altered in any sort of way. The walls are rough and jagged, eroded by time, however still somewhat well preserved on their own where Taehyung isn’t afraid of the ceiling collapsing on itself and burying him to death.

The scent of stale and humid air suffuses Taehyung’s nostrils that wrinkle when a drop falls on him. “Even the Council doesn’t know about this?”

“No. The Elders had found it wiser to keep it hushed from them.”

“And for how long whatever I’m about to see has been occurring?”

“A while,” Dahee elusively answers. “It’s punctual, for lack of a better term. It follows a pattern, one that we have yet to unearth the origin of.”

They reach a flight of stony stairs bringing them deeper underground and in an umpteenth corridor. Taehyung is thankful for his draconic blood that runs hot, making it easier to brush off the growing chilling atmosphere, the torch’s flame not enough to warm the area.

The tunnel widens. It must be the last one before Taehyung and his mother arrive at their destination because Dahee takes the torch away from Taehyung’s grasp to slot it in an iron ring attached to the wall.

Two double doors are facing them, wide and impossibly high. It wouldn’t be enough for Taehyung to pass through them in his dragon form, however smaller dragonborns would, like his mother.

“What you will see next must stay between us, Taehyung.” Dahee turns her head to bore her gaze into her son’s. “Under *no* circumstances should you share what is behind. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mother.”

Dahee bobs her head, satisfied with the answer. Then, and after motioning for Taehyung to help her, the two of them push open the double doors, this time the gate freed from any seal or runes.

A billow of foul air rustles their garments and hair.

The stench is distinct and peculiar, one that Taehyung has experienced in the past but cannot for the life of him pinpoint from where. It's pungent enough for him to raise an arm to his face but it's pointless, the odor soon clinging onto Taehyung's senses and clothes.

"By the Elders."

Unlike Taehyung, Dahee appears unfazed as she walks past the doors. "You get used to it, as grim as it may be."

Taehyung follows his mother while mapping out the place. "What the fuck is that stench?"

Dahee's mouth parts around a cone of fire aimed at the ceiling, the latter stretching so far up that it seems endless. Lanterns — hanging from chains wedged between fissures, fastened on ragged walls or stalactites — burst to life, the fire piercing through the opaque, navy veil.

The cave is half brightened up now, and is absolutely *immense* .

Taehyung can't see the other side of it that is plunged in pitch black. Dahee's fire breath has only lightened up the lanterns up to the center — or what Taehyung believes to be the center. Taehyung and Dahee are situated on the edge of a tall cliff. The ground, from the bits perceivable, is occupied by smaller hills and craters as well as some unnatural formations of rocks.

Something is odd about the latter, however.

Off.

The structures and shape of some rocks are strange. Taehyung can't fully decipher what they are from there. The cave's bottom is partially swallowed by an obscurity that the lanterns on the ceiling can't fight off, however some materials pick up the light, reflecting it in haphazard speckles.

"I don't understand." Taehyung's head twists toward his mother.

Dahee steps to the edge of the cliff. Her wings spring out of her back, rustling in the air. "Watch, and fall."

Taehyung studies the cave once more and his confusion worsens: he can't determine where the foul stench comes from, nor why everything resembles familiar yet hard to decipher silhouettes.

His lips part open around a shaky breath. He lifts a hand. He visualizes in his mind this imaginary roulette in the pool of his arcane: an intangible wheel that churns in his head. It spirals as an arrow rotates with it and both of their speeds slow down. Then, they come to a halt, the wheel immobile, the arrow settled on one of the seven segments.

The compound of his draconic arcane has done its selection, aided by Taehyung.

An orange flame, similar to his mother's, envelops Taehyung's hand right as he summons his wings, their sizes heavily diminished to accommodate his human form. He inches a foot off the edge of the cliff, and he lets himself topple down.

The rush of wind pushes Taehyung's hair off his forehead. The flames wildly flicker around his fingers, and his eyes narrow as he soon gets a better view of the ground. His wings soften the fall, snapping up and down to keep him afloat until his feet touch the floor. Taehyung generates a larger fire as he thrusts his arm above his crown, the auburn hues casting a wide glow around him.

Taehyung stills. A freezing understanding begins to dawn on him but this *cannot* be. It wouldn't make sense.

What he witnesses does not make *any* sliver of sense, and the rational part of his mind tries to deflect the view, to pretend that this ghastly sight isn't what it seems to be.

The 'rocks' litter the ground, piling up in heaps here and there or haphazardly scattered around. Some of those rocks are elongated and round, others thin and sharp, a few snapped in the middle. All are adorned with lines made of silver, as though painted on the surface.

When Taehyung had first looked down upon his arrival here, he had noticed the shadow of a column half fused with the cave's soil that he had presumed to have crumpled down at some point, as it is broken and carved in several places along the length. However the fractures are too orderly. Too regular. Where a crack can be seen exactly every three feet, or where the broken part isn't so broken as it is simply protruding out of the main, long pillar. But the pillar isn't one, nor is it made of rock. A shiver of pure fright wakes a flare of goosebumps on Taehyung's nape.

It's bone.

The column is *a spine.*

It's surrounded by femurs, tibias and more and there are skulls near them, some deprived of their teeth and fangs. The bones are of different sizes, yet all originating from the same kind: dragonborn.

Dozens upon dozens of skeletons are entombed inside this horrifying coffin.

Taehyung startles when his back knocks against the wall of the cliff he was upon minutes ago, having not realized he had started to back away from the horror laid before him.

"This is a graveyard," Taehyung whispers to his mother when she lands beside him. "A graveyard of *dragons* . Why— Why is there a damned dragon cemetery beneath our home?"

"Dragonborns are dying, my son. Afflicted by a plague devoid of a cure."

The tremors running through Taehyung are relentless. He curses under his breath. He dissipates his fire and presses his balled up hand against his mouth. "Mom, I can't believe— *Fuck*." He crouches then drops on the ground. Staring at the burial ground kept alight by the flames in his mother's hands, he rasps "Tell me what you know."

"The dragonborns were always found dead in their dragon form," Dahee starts and settles next to Taehyung. "The sickness makes it seem like a natural cause of death at first glance, however one of the Elders, whose granddaughter had succumbed to the plague, had noticed something missing from the body when she had inspected it."

"What?"

"The pouch of flame in her granddaughter's chest. It had been emptied and reduced to silver dust, as though consumed by itself from the inside. It had been the same for other dragonborns, no matter what kind of breath they could produce, no matter the size or age of their breath pouch."

“But dragonborns can survive without their breath pouch. If it’s at the core of the sickness, perhaps simply removing it can be a cure.”

Dahee grabs a hold of Taehyung’s hand. Taehyung squeezes it, seeking for a comfort and warmth that the cave is wrenching away the longer he remains here.

“The removal of the breath pouch is a dangerous process, Taehyung. It is too risky, with a high mortality rate. Remember it was used as a way to incapacitate us during the Great War. Plus this sickness attacks every organ one by one. The Elders have noticed a pattern, and specifically the frequency of it.”

“How so?”

“The plague seems to be working like a… A heart. It has a major pulse every three months, then it vanishes from existence until the next pulse. It does kill here and there in between two pulses, close to the end and beginning of a pulse, but it only affects very few dragonborns. However it replicates this cycle, over and over.”

“A heart, you say. That is a strange comparison.”

“Perhaps. However it sends and takes something at every pulse, like a heart. It spreads the sickness and takes the lives of dragonborn. Never of humans, which is another curious aspect.”

“Do you think it’s sentient? Does it choose which dragonborn to kill?”

Dahee shakes her head. “It is aimless when it comes to which dragonborn, but it is definite in what it corrodes. We've attempted to unravel the intricacies of this plague, why it only attacks dragonborns, why it occurs at every change of season, why it focuses on the organs and most importantly the breath pouch.”

“But you found nothing,” Taehyung concludes, confirmed by a nod from his mother. “So there’s this plague killing our people, no cure has been created, neither have you discovered its origin, yet *no one* else knows about it? No one ever noticed?”

“The plague does not kill many, thankfully, and as I said, it can be easily mistaken as a natural death. Our seer Elder is the reason why we can locate those dragonborns and bring some of them here if they had no family.”

“But this sickness is arcanic, isn’t it?” Contempt coats the rasp of Taehyung's voice, his upper lip curling around a snarl. “It’s born from the Arcane. It kills dragonborns *only*. The origin of it couldn’t be more evident if it hit me in the fucking face. And it has.” His gaze shifts on the display of bones and dragon skeletons.

“It isn’t that simple, Taehyung. No mere human, warlock or dragon has ever been capable of creating something like this. The potent power of this plague is from an unprecedented arcane.”

“Still. You must admit that the identity of this plague’s instigators circles back to humans, as most ailments happening to dragonborns do,” Taehyung derides and he doesn’t want to disrespect his mother, but her lack of suspicions toward humans and warlocks is nonsensical. “Dragonborns are dying. *Again* . And amidst this clusterfuck, some future leaders that will be part of the Council must consort with the people that may be at the center of our second almost extinction. It’s foolish to allow them in our midst, Mother.”

“Is it if it grants us warlocks’ arcane and knowledge?”

“That is assuming they’ll be willing to help us, which is once more overly hopeful.”

“Then what do you suggest, you who seem to have all the answers? You speak as though we have not tried to find every possible cure for the past years since we've identified this plague. But we have, Taehyung. We did and *are* doing everything in our power to—”

“Why not tell the rest of us?”

“It is our next goal. To warn dragonborns and humans both. We wanted to collect as much information as possible and entirely innocent warlocks before that. This sickness is not something we can disclose recklessly lest it incites terror and psychosis among our peers, which could very well lead to our extinction *then* . I know some dragonborns who share the same sentiments toward humans as you do, and if they were to hear about this plague, they would without an ounce of hesitation immediately start a war against humankind. We cannot afford that. Not again.”

Dahee’s voice wavers and falls quiet toward the end.

The guilt swallows Taehyung as rapidly as he laces his fingers with hers. “I’m sorry. Everything is — It’s a lot to digest.”

“I know, my son.” Dahee cups Taehyung’s cheek. She softly pats it before letting go. “I didn’t mean to spring all of this on you at once. I wanted to wait after the wedding, if it were to happen, however the Elders insisted upon you being made aware of this matter.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. They had caught wind of your potential wedding with the Jeon boy, and I had been summoned to discuss this with them.”

Taehyung makes an incredulous, noncommittal noise at the back of his throat, his eyes narrowly. “The Elders not only know but also care about this wedding? Why would they give any attention to an unimportant marriage?”

“That I do not know,” Dahee shrugs. “All they said is that a ‘fruit may be reaped’.”

“From me possibly marrying the human son?”

“It seems so.”

“Sounds like a damned, bitter fruit. I wonder what seed was sowed in their mind, then.”

“I have no idea what it could be, but it convinced me greatly.”

Taehyung understands that the Elders and the Oracle are all encompassing beings; ancient dragons that have seen many wars, peaces and times. He usually would never doubt them — no dragonborn would dare —, however he questions the truth of the Elders for the first time, if perhaps they may have misinterpreted what they have seen.

“What about Jeon's son? Why him?”

“Jungkook has caught my attention during one of my visits.” The gravity that had taken over Dahee faintly loosens up, her form relaxing. “There is something peculiar about this boy, and the Elders seemed to agree with my assessment.”

“Peculiar? What is?”

“His mind, among other things I can’t pinpoint. I only got the chance to chat with him once, unfortunately under the distant supervision of his parents. However this single discussion was enough to pique my curiosity.” Dahee's smile grows as she stands on her feet. “He seems sharp, although hidden behind this facade of compliance. He would do great as a leader with you. He would balance your tendencies to be brazen and impulsive.”

Taehyung swats the arm his mother extends to rise on his own instead. “Thanks, Mom,” he says with playful offense.

“You can be too reckless sometimes, Son," Dahee chuckles. "I believe Jungkook could temperate you.”

Taehyung doesn’t argue in spite of how much he wants to. He’s tired and desires nothing more than to leave this horrid cave.

“I know you may not trust me on this, but the marriage *will* strengthen our relationships with humans and warlocks, as well as give us assets that aren’t negligible.” Dahee's wings spread behind her and she begins to fly along the side of the cliff, Taehyung joining her.

“Assets to help us against the plague.”

“Yes. Humans and warlocks trust each other, and if this trust extends to us due to the upcoming weddings, warlocks will then be more inclined to help us elucidate the cause of the plague.”

It makes sense , Taehyung thinks, but he still isn’t fond of the idea of humans being an active part of the Council.

“When is the next pulse?”

“In around 90 days. When winter will leave place for spring.”

“So we have a little over three months to somehow trust warlocks and humans, and then hopefully gain their aid.” Taehyung lands on top of the cliff, his wings disappearing. “It’s a short time frame. Not telling anyone makes it harder to find a solution, but the opposite is also risky for reasons you mentioned earlier. It all sounds too precarious."

“Prices and gambles must be given to move forward.”

“Except humans could make us trip on the path,” Taehyung remarks. His eyes narrow at the amused expression that Dahee schools a tad too late for Taehyung to miss it. “You’re having fun with this, aren’t you?”

“While I am not ‘having fun’ with the death of our people,” Dahee quotes and taps her upper lip to fruitlessly conceal her smile, “I *do* like the prospect of allying with the Jeon family. I enjoy infuriating the Queen without her realizing it is done purposefully. You will see that it is quite entertaining.”

Taehyung emits a fond chuckle. “I’m sure I will.”

“It will also be interesting to watch how you act around this boy."

“Huh? I won’t act like anything.”

“We shall see. Jungkook’s beauty is one I have rarely seen before. Aside from you and I,” Dahee adds with a wink and loops her arm around Taehyung’s. “He’s beautiful. Impossibly beautiful.”

“What's that gotta do with anything? Plus he’s human, he's ugly by definition.” Taehyung doesn’t really mean this childish jab, but the offended look on his mother’s face is, as expected, hilarious.

“Taehyung!” Dahee smacks his chest. “I've raised you better than that.”

“Too bad Minsoo has been dismantling it all.”

“Nonetheless, you’ll be fine if you accept to wed Jungkook.”

“And what if I refuse?”

Dahee stops and turns to face Taehyung. “Then I’ll cancel it. You always have a choice, my son, no matter how I may have made it seem otherwise. All I ask of you is to give it some proper and unbiased thoughts, unlike you have thus far.”

Taehyung heaves a sigh, shoulders slumping. “I’m not saying that I’m accepting, but I’ll ponder over this. Properly.”

Dahee grins and pulls Taehyung into an embrace that he reciprocates. “I love you, my son.”

“I love you too,” Taehyung mumbles. However, unable to keep at bay his last shred of irascibility, he adds “I reserve myself the right to be indefinitely obnoxious.”

Dahee bursts into laughter. She releases Taehyung to swivel around, her long, brown hair held in a ponytail nearly smacking Taehyung on the way. “Now, if you were anything but yourself, I would be disappointed."

“Are you implying that I’m always obnoxious?”

“I would never speak ill of my own kin.”

Taehyung peers inside the cave. He draws a final swipe of his gaze on the dragonborn graveyard, before he tucks the memory somewhere at the forefront of his mind, however far away enough to hopefully not elicit any additional nightmare.

Taehyung catches up to his mother. There’s a jitter in his steps that prompts him to walk faster, as though being in the mere presence of skeletons of those that have died from the plague could infect him as well.

“Has the son agreed to the wedding?”

Dahee, as if sensing Taehyung's discomfort, says “You and our people are safe until the next pulse, Son. Only very, very few will succumb to the plague until the next pulse.”

“But in 90 days some of us will die in a large batch if we don’t find a cure or create some sort of safe spot against the plague.” Taehyung brings the double doors shut. They close in a heavy thud that resounds between his ears, and his unease only alleviates the more space and barriers there are between himself and the cemetery.

“Time is of the essence, yes, which is why we have been proceeding quickly with the marriages. With your accord, we shall see through yours.”

“What about the Jeon son’s accord?”

“As far as I have heard from himself and his parents, he is not opposed to it.”

“Of course he wouldn’t be. Elders know they would gain a lot from this marriage, starting with a spot at the Council,” Taehyung grumbles. “You mentioned a meeting with them. When will it be?”

“This upcoming Saturday night.”

Taehyung freezes. He can only gape at his mother.

“That’s in less than a week!”

Dahee has the audacity to giggle, undoubtedly entertained by this prospect as she sashays down the tunnel.

“Taehyung?! Are you ready?!”

“Yes!”

Taehyung trudges out of his bedroom in unhurried steps, making his way through the corridors. He descends the staircase where his parents wait for him at the bottom.

“Shall we use a cart?”

“How about a flight for you and Taehyung, darling? It would be much faster, and I could tag along on your back.”

“Let us fly there, then. I’m sure Taehyung wouldn’t mind.”

“Son!” Junhyun's boisterous excitement at the outing is one that Taehyung does not share, the older man dressed in an obscure, sage suit adorned with some of his own dragon scales at the shoulders. “You look…”

“Informal,” Dahee supplies, hands on her hips. She is also wearing a suit, Taehyung notes. She's not fond of dresses and other garments as such that she finds both impractical and uncomfortable.

Taehyung has only mustered a slight effort to make himself presentable to the Jeon family.

He has opted for a tight fitting, burgundy linen shirt, the top buttons opened to reveal two golden chains, one closer to the neck and the other dangling against his chest. The shirt is tucked in a tapered pair of black pants, the latter decorated with a plethora of pockets on the side as well as some front and back. Taehyung has also finished the look with some equally black work boots and a rapid pass of comb in his raven, wavy strands.

The outfit is complemented with Taehyung's favorite cloak to have on during the winter, the garment made out of wolf fur. Its collar is wide, wrapping around Taehyung's shoulders and down his biceps. The cloak is long, the hem nearly dragging across the wooden planks as he fastens the cross of double belts over his chest.

Taehyung's draconic heritage as well as the type of his arcane renders him much less sensitive to the cold, however this early winter has proven itself to be one of the most frigid, where he finds himself shivering once outside.

"You look good, Son, but you could have dressed up a little more formally. We are meeting one of, if not *the* most important human imperial lineage."

"Why should I?" Taehyung mutters. "My betrothed will rarely see me dressed in formal clothing. Might as well get him used to it if I marry him."

"Petulant child," Dahee says with a lighthearted laugh. "Oh I love this, actually."

"Why the change of heart, Darling?" Junhyun guides his mate toward the exit door with a hand on her back, so Taehyung takes it upon himself to fasten the entrance door shut behind them.

"Because the Queen is a stickler for rules and etiquette. She'll be appalled to see Taehyung's casual ensemble." Dahee's chuckle turns into a sound that is more of a sly cackle and *by the Elders* . Taehyung will always be thankful to not have this devious woman as his enemy. "The look on her face will be priceless."

"It will be a promising night, then. Perhaps we will have the chance to taste their wine again. It was divine the last time we did."

"If not, we can task our son to steal some from their wine cellar," Dahee whispers to her husband. A glint of interest gleams in Junhyun's eyes.

"We have more than enough money to afford whatever refined bottle of wine the Jeon family makes," Taehyung reprimands.

"Yes, but I do not like the Queen, and…borrowing from her would be a pleasing gift in return for the tolerance we have to exert in her presence."

"Elders know patience will be needed with her and the King."

"Mom. Dad." Taehyung pinches the bridge of his nose. "We are *not* stealing from the Jeon family and starting a war over wine of all things, so can we *please* leave now and get this over with?"

"We were dallying, Taehyung."

"We're not foolish enough to steal from Amaris' Queen and King, in spite of our dislike for them," Junhyun confirms. "But it does sound charming, doesn't it?" He promptly backtracks. "I can

already envision the look on the King's face. Do you think his everlasting frown can deepen more if possible?"

"Shall we test it out? He abhors being opposed to, maybe we could…"

Taehyung ignores the rest of the conversation — scheming, really — in favor of changing to his dragon counterpart.

Another aspect that Taehyung loves about it is the lack of shredded clothes that the transformation saves him from. He doesn't know why dragonborns' arcane and physiology works this way, however the shifting from human to dragon and vise versa has no impact on anything he may be wearing while in his human form.

Taehyung shakes himself and raises on his talons. His elongated and acute claws dig into the soil, his size now allowing him to see above the tree lines. His mother's dragon is slender, the scales of a light auburn color. She is much smaller than Taehyung or her mate, yet equipped with stronger muscles that ripple under her skin as she lowers on the ground.

Taehyung himself in terms of width, length and weight is part of the rare breeds of gargantuan dragonborns towering over most dragons. However he still pales in comparison to his father. Junhyun is downright *colossal*, nearly twice the size of Taehyung and the largest dragon in Vanae, and perhaps even in Aurora.

"I'll ride on your mother's back for the trip to Amaris, Son," Junhyun says, to Taehyung's relief. Junhyun may be impressive in his dragon self, and it is reflected in how slow and rapidly exhausted of a flier he is.

Taehyung turns his forelimb, palm facing the sky to let his father climb on it. Seconds later, Junhyun steps down to sit crossed legs on Dahee's nape, his position secured with practice eased by the tall spike he leans against.

Without any further ado, and with an *'En route!'* shouted by Junhyun; Taehyung's and Dahee's wings sweep through the air, and the family flies off toward Amaris, the capital of the Jeon dynasty.

The flight is peaceful and elapses without a hitch, except for those few times where Dahee, prompted by Junhyun, decides to do some tricks in the sky, one of them involving a laughing Junhyun who falls from her back when she turns upside down amidst an arch.

Taehyung loves his parents.

He truly does.

But he takes some distance from them and their embarrassing aerobatic maneuvers when a thunder of dragons passes by them and throws a perplexed look at the human happily tumbling down the sky through a ring of fire.

A few hours trickle by before Taehyung finally perceives the outskirts of Amaris in the horizon.

There's a knot in his chest that coalesces with the irritation lingering in him. What does not help his sour mood and meager patience is how deprived of sleep he has been for the past week, his nights and days tormented by the constant reminders of the dragon graveyard under his home. Flying helps, however. It always has.

His mother and him are hovering above the canopy, still low enough to glimpse at the city that endlessly stretches under them.

A wave of dread emanates from Amaris' inhabitants and reeks Taehyung's senses. He can easily assume that these humans aren't used to seeing dragons pass over them. After all, dragonborns prefer to remain inside the borders of their own lands, in territories kept away from humankind.

Nonetheless, the humans must have been warned about Taehyung and his family’s arrival because only a few scamper inside their home, the rest continuing with their cautious examination of the occupied sky.

Choosing to disregard the people, Taehyung slows down his pace to scout the city. He further decreases his speed to enjoy what is left of his peace before the meeting — *confrontation*, his mind supplies — with the Jeon family.

A soft growl grabs Taehyung’s attention, and he peers ahead at his mother who angles toward a castle situated on a hill at the north of Amaris, overlooking the rest of the city.

Taehyung speeds up when Dahee and Junhyun vanish from his view as they descend. His wings billow him near the citadel. Five tiny spots stand close to the set of stairs and platform leading to the castle’s entrance doors. There’s a garden as well, of intricate shapes, colorful floral compositions and perfectly trimmed hedges that Taehyung has to admit to find elegant.

With one last internal sigh, a prayer to the Elders, and the thought that he will at least enjoy a midnight flight when he will go back home, Taehyung dives.

He lands with a gust of air and dust on the avenue of beige cobblestones. An immature satisfaction flares within him when his claws dislodge the well crafted path, bits of soil meddling with the stones. His tail unravels and snaps behind him while he looks down in every meaning of the word at the Jeon family.

They seem so measly and insignificant like this, as the King and Queen peer back at him with their chin held high in palpable conceit.

It would be so easy, Taehyung thinks with disdain.

The talon of one of his forelimbs could so effortlessly *squash* those imperious humans, and while Taehyung is not a homicidal man per se, he cannot rein in the thoughts that flicker in his head at the remembrance of all the suffering and death the Jeon dynasty and other humans have inflicted upon dragonborns. It’s only at Dahee’s warning glare that Taehyung reverts in a rustle of fabric. The faux fur cloak drapes over his shoulders as he walks forward, hands tucked in trousers’ pockets.

Taehyung’s gaze immediately settles on a young man standing still behind those he presumes to be the King and Queen.

The son, Taehyung summarizes.

Taehyung doesn't know what he had been anticipating regarding the appearance of his suitor. However, objectively speaking, and just as Dahee had said, the Jeon's family heir is beautiful, which infuriates Taehyung for reasons he cannot name.

The son's features have fine angles, what with the angular jawline, arrays of golden earrings, or the piercing gaze aimed at the ground. They're sharpened by the short raven hair neatly slicked back on the right, while the bang is parted to the side and reaches just under the eye. Yet, the edges of the man's face are unexpectedly softened by the round eyes and button nose, as well as the sparse beauty marks dotting his skin.

The Prince looks exactly like one in the navy, nearly black suit he's wearing that clashes against the necklace holding a ruby pendant. His head lifts as his parents and Taehyung's exchange their greetings, and the detachment that sticks to the Prince's figure fleetingly dissipates.

It happens shortly, briefly to a point where Taehyung would have missed it if he hadn't been staring at the man, however there is an evident shock that washes across the Prince's face when his eyes meet Taehyung's for the first time. Taehyung can't tell if it's positive or negative, and he frankly does not care enough to give the question any more thought.

"Queen Seohyung, King Sungmin, a pleasure to be in your company tonight," Dahee says with a hospitality Taehyung knows to be fabricated.

"A pleasure as well," the Queen echoes with mirrored diplomacy.

What Taehyung cares about, on the other hand, is the way the Prince isn't averting his attention from him. The son's gaze darts across Taehyung's face and figure, most likely to assess him and his worth.

It irritates Taehyung.

He wants to utter a *'The fuck are you looking at?'* , or maybe an Ô so childish and silly *'Want to paint my picture?'* just to hear what the Prince would answer. Would he look away in shame and fold back in on himself as he had been mere seconds ago? Or would he bite back with a retort of his own?

Perhaps a bit of both.

Taehyung bristles when the human still maintains his scrutiny, the stare now holding a quiet challenge in it that Taehyung refuses to be defeated by. His upper lip twitches with the repressed urge to snarl, and he's left to wonder again why he has ever agreed to this charade of a marriage.

When their parents bow to each other, the Prince promptly follows suit and breaks the tension that had flared up. Taehyung remains immobile. Hell would freeze over before he bows to humans.

"Meet our son, Kim Taehyung, future leader of Vanae, and member of the Council," Dahee introduces and she grabs Taehyung by the sleeve to drag him to her side.

"A pleasure to meet you, Taehyung." Seohyung smiles but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Likewise." While Taehyung does not blatantly antagonize them, he also makes no effort to present an amicable facade. Plus he's busy fighting off the hilarity that rises in him at the evident displeasure in the Queen and King's eyes at his casual wear.

“Shall we drop formalities? Our families are to possibly unite, after all,” Junhyun proposes.

The Queen and King promptly agree. “We shall.”

“Let us head inside,” Sungmin says and turns around. “It is too cold to meander outside.”

“Beautiful garden as always,” Dahee starts, well in her element. “I see you have changed your floral arrangement.”

“I found it appropriate to follow our gardener’s advice and deviate to winter resistant flowers for our home. Otherwise our previous flora would have met an unfortunate end and been of no use for decorum.”

Taehyung tunes them out.

The King and Junhyun are at the head of the group, conversing together about matters Taehyung does not try to pry on. Dahee and the Queen are behind their respective husbands, the two engrossed in a banal exchange of niceties while Taehyung is at the back of the group.

The Prince, at Taehyung's left from a safe distance, is carrying the same unreadable expression, made eerie by his muteness. *Something* about him bothers Taehyung, aside from the fact that he appears as aloof as Taehyung has been and feels. The Prince makes no attempt to socialize with Taehyung’s parents or his own, except for the small curve of his mouth when Dahee tilts her head toward him.

Taehyung seizes his 'opponent' with darts of his glare that flit across the Prince's surprisingly fit figure. His eyes narrow when his gaze collides with the man's. The son, to Taehyung’s ire, quirks a brow and deadpans Taehyung in a way that can only be deemed as irked.

So the Prince has some backbone to himself.

An attitude , really, oozing of arrogance and malice or worse, and perhaps Taehyung is imagining it all in his head but there has to be some truth in it. Taehyung wisely chooses to ignore the man, but he has to bite down on his tongue to refrain himself from spitting out a remark full of vitriol. He still pays heed to the nagging whispers at the back of his head telling him to exert caution when it comes to the cryptic prince.

“We may immediately settle in the dining room. Our fare for the night is awaiting us,” Sungmin announces.

Now…

Taehyung and his parents are well renowned, one of the most important families of dragonborns in Aurora. They’re wealthy, to put it in other words, however compared to the display that unfolds before Taehyung as they enter the citadel, Taehyung’s family looks destitute.

Everything expresses affluence and riches. The interior is not decorated in a manner to please one’s artistry, but rather to flaunt one’s money in anyone’s face.

It’s of poor, ostentatious taste.

Chandeliers of diamonds illuminate the area, large enough to instantly kill whoever may be underneath if they were to fall — Taehyung fleetingly considers it as the Queen and King pass

beneath one. Vast paintings mounted with golden frames depicting scenes of colonization and dragon slaying; armors of silver and gold, and also what seem to be historical weapons like swords, crossbows and more; line the walls in a painstakingly crafted exhibit.

The display of wealth strikes one in the face whether they want it or not. A *'Look at all we've achieved and gained through blood, murder and war!'* The allegory of Jeon history. After all, the pool of avarice is to humans what the pool of arcane is to dragonborns: nigh endless and rarely emptied.

Taehyung catches up to his father in two quick strides, and the remainder of the walk is brief.

They soon pass through the threshold of two candelabras and glass double doors opened to the lit dining area. The place, just like everything else in this castle, is unnecessarily huge for such meager and small-minded people: dozens of chairs are installed at the table, and soon three on each side are tugged away by servants.

Taehyung internally scoffs at how much time it takes the Jeon family to round the ridiculously long table. It must be thirty feet long.

"Please, make yourself comfortable." Seohyung gestures to the seats facing her. "I believe this sitting arrangement will suit us best."

"No need, thanks," Taehyung mutters to the maid who makes an aborted motion to take away his cloak. He can very well undress himself and sit his ass on his own, and he does just that, unfastening the two criss-crossing belts against his chest.

"Some rest at last," Dahee sighs. "This flight was taxing, mainly due to a mischievous person."

"Hopefully your energy will be replenished after our fare," Seohyung smiles. "If not, you are more than welcome to stay for the night."

"I believe we will be fine. Our son can fly us back home if I am too fatigued for the return. He prefers the sky to the land."

Taehyung emits a distracted noise of agreement, his gaze riveted on the man before him he scrutinizes every motion of.

The Prince lowers with poise and elegance, spine straight once installed and a leg crossed over the other, eons away from how Taehyung is used to dragonborns slumping down and loitering about in whatever awkward position they find most comfortable.

"How about some wine from our own vintage?" Sungmin proposes, met with an expectant compliance from Junhyun.

"It would be lovely," Junhyun grins, mirrored by Dahee.

Footsteps echo in the dining room. Taehyung surveys the two servants who make their way toward the table, armed with a couple bottles of wine.

A wave of restlessness suddenly bubbles underneath Taehyung's skin.

He understands why when his gaze falls on the Prince who's already peering at him. Taehyung fully shrugs off his cloak and folds it over the back of his chair, all under the Prince's attention. Even as

Taehyung readjusts his shirt that had shifted during the walk, the Prince follows Taehyung's movements.

The man's eyes jump to Taehyung's neck — probably to estimate the cost of the necklaces —, then they skim lower to the hint of displayed collarbones or the chest — Taehyung doesn't really know —, but the Prince looks with an intent that, once more, Taehyung is left to guess the countenance of.

One of Taehyung's eyes twitches.

He unceremoniously plops down.

The Prince averts his gaze.

"Thank you," Dahee and Junhyun both say after their glasses have been filled up. Taehyung notes the absence of similar politeness from the King and Queen toward their own maids.

"Would you like some wine, sir?" A servant asks.

Taehyung shakes his head. "Nah. Can I have some water instead, if it's no bother?"

"Right away, sir," the man nods and briskly strides away, skipping the Prince with the wine offer.

Taehyung slouches against the back of his seat, propping his forearms on the armrests in faux nonchalance. His combat boots drag across the marble floor to spread his legs and stretch his tense muscles that are already aching for another flight. The presence of the Jeon family facing his own is a constant reminder that he's surrounded by humans in an unfamiliar human land, and the uncomfortable cold sweat crawls up his spine into a repressed shiver.

"What a delight," Junhyun exclaims after another sip of his drink. "Exquisite wine."

"My husband and I closely surveyed its conception." Seohyung snaps her fingers, and like an owner commanding a pack of griffins, a flurry of maids enter the dining room. "Finish and bring our fare. Promptly. Bring us some iced water as well."

"Of course, my Queen."

Whatever nonexistent sliver of respect Taehyung may have had the will to muster for tonight scorches to nothingness at the sight. His parents themselves seem bothered by the Queen's pedantic order, if the downturn of their lips is any indication.

Taehyung welcomes the distraction of a servant pouring water into his glass. When he speaks, his voice is lowered, ensuring that the Queen and King can't hear him. "Say," he starts and discreetly leans near the servant, "do you have some chocolate you can sneak to me? I think I'll need the sweetness to counter the Queen's acrid presence."

The servant chuckles.

When the Queen glances their way, Taehyung conceals the servant's sound with a cough.

"We have an assortment of syrup you may distill in your water, if you wish to," the servant says, loud enough for those at the table to hear.

Taehyung meets the servant's amused eyes. "Do you have a strawberry one? And what's your name?"

"We do, sir. My name is Sohee. Pleased to meet you, sir."

"So am I." For the first time today, Taehyung draws a genuine smile. "Is syrup a secret code for chocolate?"

"No. I will bring chocolate chips to you, however I believe its sweetness won't suffice for the purposes you seek through them," Sohee quietly jests, drawing a chuckle out of Taehyung. "I will be quick, sir."

"No rush. Thank you, Sohee." Taehyung's mood slightly improves. At least one human seems somewhat nice, even if he would never trust one ever again.

"Making new friends?"

Taehyung's smile drops faster than the words can reach his ears. "I believe it is important to extend respect toward those working with, or rather for you, in your case." His eyes don't stray away from the Queen whose abjection at his kindness toward her workers marks her tight features. "It may come as a surprise to you, but a simple 'thank you' and 'please' can go a long way."

"Of course, that I agree with. However respect must be earned, akin to trust."

Taehyung wants to throw a retort about how her agreement is rendered useless by the finger snaps *plural* that she uses to order her maids around, however he finds it more astute to not push the issue. For now.

"Happy to know we all seem to be in accord in this matter. The marriage, if it is to happen, will be a great show of mutual trust," Dahee says, now regarding Taehyung with a merry understanding.

"It undeniably will," Sungmin concurs in spite of the wariness that surrounds his every word and glance aimed at Taehyung.

What a slimy buffoon. Taehyung straightens up and props his elbows on the table, his hands raising to clasp over one another in an effort to hide the grimace that twists his mouth.

He peers at a point on the wall, and the rest of the waiting for the fare passes like that.

He doesn't participate in the idle chat floating through the dining room, except for the instance where Sohee comes back with the syrup and pieces of chocolate that she leaves in a small pouch on the table. However the Queen tears Taehyung out of his internal meandering and munching of chocolate chips.

"Taehyung, we have not heard much from you."

Taehyung's gaze slowly drifts on Seohyung. Similar to her son, something about the Queen ignites Taehyung's instincts to stay away from the woman. The feeling is much darker than with the Prince, more cunning and abrasive. Where Taehyung is annoyed with the Prince and King's masks of aloofness, he is unnerved by the one the Queen adorns.

"What would you like to know?"

“Anything that allows us to hear more of you. We were given limited personal information about you."

“I’m 26, for starters. While I’m not an official member of the Council, per se, I still participate in many of the reunions since I lead the hunting and exploring squadrons in Vanae.”

“Interesting,” Sungmin hums. “You must know your way in Aurora and neighboring islands.”

“I know my way everywhere. If not, I quickly learn to,” Taehyung adds.

“It would be quite beneficial for us. There are lands, caverns and other places we haven’t been able to explore due to our inability to fly."

Of course the line of questions all rotate back to how useful Taehyung and his family can be to them.

“Have you had other paramours or betrothed in your life?”

That is a query Taehyung had not expected to hear, let alone from the Queen. “No, I never have. I had no interest in that. Still don’t.”

“No improper offspring, then?”

“I’m gay,” Taehyung flatly declares.

“Good. So is our son,” Seohyung nods. “I suppose the integrity of our lineage will end with you both, but will hopefully extend through rigorously selected fostering.”

“Time will tell,” Taehyung shrugs.

“You don’t have any prospect of adopting an heir?” Sungmin asks.

“I never said that,” Taehyung rebuts. “I’m simply wondering if the heir you speak of will need to be exclusively human and non-dragonborn.”

“Well... That is a subject we can breach when the time comes,” Seohyung dismisses with a wave of her hand. “You don’t seem particularly happy about the wedding."

Taehyung ponders on whether to be brutally honest or lie. He ultimately opts on giving a half truth. “I’m a cautious man.” *Somewhat*. “However I trust my parents, and I hope the trust that will be awarded to your family will not be received with ill intentions.”

Annoyance flickers in the Queen and King’s eyes.

“I can assure you our ambitions are honest. We have the best interests in mind for our kingdom. And yours,” Sungmin says with a deliberate delay that he explains next, “given that our association comes to fruition.”

“And if not?”

“Then we will search for another suitor. Our son was to be married to a few other dragonborn leaders before you. Unfortunately, some difficulties had arisen with them.”

“Really?” Dahee probes. “With whom, if I may?” She asks the Prince but the latter doesn’t respond.

“Kim Changmin, Kang Sukwoo, Cha In-Pyo and Choi Seungwon, to name a few,” Sungmin lists.

Taehyung catches onto the pattern there, and so do his parents. The three of them exchange looks of incredulity for Taehyung, and of pure revolt for his parents.

“Choi Seungwon had been the last one we had attempted an union with before you,” Seohyung discloses.

Taehyung studies the Prince in the corner of his eyes.

The intangible mask the son had carefully crafted fissures, the crack visible through his head held low. It grants Taehyung a glimpse of the unadulterated scorn that overtakes the Prince’s face for a moment so abrupt that Taehyung thinks he has imagined it.

“Isn’t Seungwon and every other dragonborn listed in their forties?” Taehyung questions the Prince, but when the latter slips on his veil of apathy and does not reply, Taehyung peers at the Queen.

“Late fifties, actually. Early sixties for Sukwoo. Seungwon is the youngest amidst the lot, in his mid forties," Junhyun intervenes. He is not the kind of man to be quick to anger, but even he can’t conceal the indignation from his timber.

Sensing the terse shift in the atmosphere, Seohyung smiles and pats the Prince's thigh under the table. “Our son knows the importance of his role as the heir of the Jeon dynasty. He is aware of the numerous advantages and the prosperity that being wedded to a rightful dragonborn will bring to the empire.”

“*Right,*” Taehyung chuckles through a derisive upturn of his mouth. “And you don’t find the idea of giving him up to men over twice his age abhorrent?”

“Taehyung,” Dahee warns.

“I personally find it quite repulsive at best, and horrifyingly immoral at worst. Aren’t you supposed to be parents before Amaris’ Queen and King? Unless your son’s happiness has no importance for you as long as yours is satiated, which is the most distasteful knowledge I’ve acquired about you both tonight.”

“Son. Enough.”

“Not only are those men twice the Prince’s age, but also awfully cruel in Seungwon’s case, and that's saying something since three out of the dragonborns you mentioned are despicable pigs. Was this selection purposefully done, perhaps?” Taehyung carries on, forgoing his parents' interventions. “While I understood years ago that humans can be incredibly vile and heartless, Seungwon is by far worse than most other humans I have met in my life, and Elders knows I have stumbled on really, *really* barbarous ones.”

“*Taehyung*.”

“It has me wondering, truly. If *this* is the best interest you have for your own kin, I’m curious to how it will translate for my people in the future.”

“Taehyung! This is en—”

“Seungwon had never shown any sign of this alleged harshness you speak of,” Seohyung counters — *lies* — and she looks amused by the veer in the tone of the conversation. It only serves to worsen Taehyung’s bubbling ire. “He had been kind and welcoming toward us and our son.”

“Oh please, you cannot be so naïve," Taehyung chuckles and reclines against his chair. “Seungwon’s reputation precedes him. A damn rat would know about it.”

“Perhaps your ‘rats’ were misinformed.”

“Or perhaps you've denied every word they may have narrated to your neglecting ears, even if it meant throwing him between Seungwon’s claws.” Taehyung jerks his head toward the Prince who is *still* not uttering a single word in spite of Taehyung's attempts to integrate him in the discussion.

Seohyung is chuckling, surprisingly. Sungmin is smiling as well, even if the edges of it are made acute by irritation.

“You seem to care a lot about our son’s well-being already, Taehyung,” Seohyung says. “It is reassuring to see.”

Taehyung pauses.

His fingers tighten around the glass of water he grips onto.

The audacity of this fucking —

“Our son does care about yours indeed,” Dahee assures with a tight lip smile.

Taehyung would be caught dead before caring for a human again, but he makes no mention of it.

“As for the previous suitors we have met, they are no different than you, Taehyung,” Seohyung resumes. “You may share some similarities with Seungwon considering your… fiery temper.”

“Don’t be insulting. The age difference is an important distinction between this pig and I, among many others,” Taehyung says, falling right into Queen’s taunt without concern. Worst case scenario: they get offended enough to start a war, granting Taehyung the luxury of burning their pretentious asses to a crisp. Best case scenario: he gets to wipe off the parents’ stupid grins with a punch or two.

Either way, it would all end in Taehyung’s favor.

Temporarily.

“Marriages like these serve singular purposes that are not to be restricted by something as mundane as the age of those involved,” Seohyung carries on, her infuriating haughtiness returned. “If the participants are adults, and if the wish to marry is mutual and consensual; I, my husband, and son, see no issue with a few decades of disparity.”

“What has happened with Seungwon?” Junhyun inquires. “Knowing this man’s preferences, I can’t quite place why he would refuse your lovely son as his betrothed.”

Sungmin casts a disappointed look at the Prince who tenses. “Jungkook had brought shame upon us that day.”

Right.

Jungkook.

“He had been disobedient to his betrothed. When our son had been sent back to us at Seungwon’s request, the marriage had been called off. However Jungkook has been disciplined since then. He will be compliant to you. Seungwon had deemed it crucial to improve upon obedience and manners.”

Taehyung doesn't bother concealing his scorn and disgust from his voice when he rasps “Seungwon doesn’t wish to have a betrothed leading *with* him. Or doing anything he doesn’t demand, really. All he wants is a mindless doll he’ll keep by his feet to shape and brutalize to his whims."

“What about what *you* want?”

“Unlike Seungwon, I don’t particularly get off on that kind of thing.” Taehyung revels in the faint snarl of aversion on the rulers’ face.

“Kim Taehyung.” Dahee lowly rumbles.

“That is another difference between him and I.” Taehyung's glower bores onto the Queen. “I’m not fond of forced compliance.”

“If you do not seek obedience from your betrothed, why are you so hostile toward anyone daring to oppose you?”

“I’m hostile toward the lack of honesty, not the opposition.” And also because the Queen is a fucking waste of air but that’s a subject Taehyung won’t touch on quite yet. “I don’t seek obedience.”

“Every leader should."

“No. A leader guides, accompanies and listens. A ruler, on the other hand, orders and offers no choice. You, Queen and King Jeon, are rulers. I’m a leader. Or rather soon to be leader." A silence settles in the room, only disturbed when Taehyung speaks once more. “Anything else you would like to know about what I desire?”

“No.” Venom drips through Seohyung's smile. “You have made yourself clear.”

“Nonetheless, Jungkook is a quiet man and will be devoted to you and the duties you see fit for him, Taehyung,” Sungmin says, who has clearly missed the entire point of Taehyung’s rant or decided to dismiss it altogether. “It is in his nature.”

Willingly in the Prince’s nature? Taehyung doubts it, and he’s about to say as much when he feels a hand on his knee. Dahee squeezes it once. Taehyung glances at her, and behind this thick curtain of approval that she feigns to aim at the Queen, there is an anger in her shaking hand, echoing with Taehyung’s.

The uncomfortable muteness that had stretched for what feels like hours is soon torn by the arrival of a dozen servants coming in with tonight's fare.

Taehyung — ever so stubborn — presses onto one of Sungmin's earlier comments. “Why reach out to us and not try with Seungwon if you have been ‘disciplined’ as Seungwon wanted?”

“Seungwon had felt too disrespected by Jungkook and—”

“I’m asking *him*,” Taehyung firmly interrupts Sungmin and tilts his glass toward Jungkook.

“That man had forcibly overstepped the boundaries that I had made crystal clear, and had paid a price for it in consequence,” Jungkook declares, his voice leveled. “I had rapidly realized that I would have been at the receiving end of his strictness if I were to stay with him.”

A hush of surprise floats in the room.

Taehyung’s gaze darts at the Prince. The servants’ motions falter before they resume their pace as they lay down plates of food and baskets of bread, refilling glasses of wine at the same time.

“What price?” Taehyung asks.

“*Jungkook*,” Sungmin warns, jaw set tight.

“What price?” Dahee pushes with a pointed look at the King.

Jungkook’s lips curl and it’s easy to tell that it’s a practiced smile, drawn over and over again. It knits the corners of his eyes but it isn’t trailed by any genuine joy, instead darkened by a ruthless satisfaction. It has the taut muscles of his jaw shifting beneath his skin, his right fist balled up around his cutlery.

“It isn’t import—”

“His left earlobe," Jungkook rasps. "I bit it off and spat it back at him.”

“Jungkook!”

Jungkook flinches and drops his head at lightning speed. The chopsticks rattle on the table when he lets go of them. He snatches a napkin, his hands flying out of view under the table. “My apologies, my kin—”

Taehyung and everyone in the dining room jolt at the rambunctious laughter that erupts out of Junhyun. The latter slams a palm on the table and his hilarity is echoed by Dahee who joins him with a pleased chuckle. Taehyung smiles as well, partially due to the puzzlement on the Queen and King’s face.

“My! I like this boy!"

“So do I.” Dahee presents a hand toward Jungkook. “Hello again, dear.”

Jungkook stares at the extended limb for a second before shaking it. “I’m... Hi?”

“Pleased to *properly* make your acquaintance,” Dahee says with a knowing smile.

“My deepest apologies for his rudeness." Seohyung's words are clipped, so painfully wrenched out of her mouth, that Taehyung has to press his lips into a thin line to quell down his laughter. “He is usually well-behaved.”

“Nonsense,” Junhyun disregards, standing to also shake hands with a bewildered Jungkook, the Prince’s eyes ever so slightly widened and eyebrows raised on his forehead.

“Indeed, Darling,” Dahee grins. “Dragonborns have no trouble with said ‘rudeness’. We appreciate it, contrary to forged appearances.”

Taehyung picks up his chopsticks, twirling one between his fingers. He rests his chin in the palm of his left hand and unabashedly stares at Jungkook.

The *something* that perplexes Taehyung is here anew. It’s the way Jungkook moves, Taehyung slowly begins to unravel. The Prince’s demeanor is demure at all times: chin lowered, shoulders slightly withdrawn in themselves, gaze avoidant, and when he does look at his interlocutors, it's done with a palpable coyness.

Taehyung stills as he's hit by a belated revelation.

The Prince plays a role.

He makes himself look *small*, for lack of a better term, but Taehyung sees beyond this.

Taehyung assumes that this impersonation is the result of a strict, perhaps abusive upbringing. But this isn’t enough. There’s another thing the Prince is keeping hushed, buried under this pretense of harmlessness and complacency.

Eyes riveted on the Prince, Taehyung can catch onto the danger that Jungkook can represent. It’s enhanced by the earlobe tale and the shimmers of violent vindication that had gleamed in Jungkook’s eyes at the retelling.

Taehyung wishes that he could see through the wood of the table, or make himself invisible to hunch under it and verify if his observation had been a trick of the candles’ light or not. Thankfully, as if his request had been heard, the Prince’s hands find their place back around the cutlery.

A hum rumbles in Taehyung's chest, of prudence and curiosity.

There are crescents carved in Jungkook’s right palm. They’re pink and raw with leftover smudges of blood, faint enough to be imperceptible to a distracted eye, but Taehyung is anything but that at present. “Should I worry about losing an ear if we’re to marry?”

Jungkook’s gaze sharpens when it settles on Taehyung. He lolls his head to the side, and his biting stare pierces through the few strands of hair brushing his forehead. “You won’t if you keep your hands to yourself when I demand it.”

“Jungkook.” It’s Sungmin, waves of displeasure wafting off him. “We have spoken about this.”

The mask that had taken an acute edge is gone, replaced by the safety of submission. “My apologies, my king.”

“Well,” Dahee chirps, evidently entertained, “if this wedding goes through, it will surely prove itself to be a particular spectacle.”

“Let us begin our fare,” Seohyung says, encouraged by Junhyun. “Lest it grows any colder.”

Everyone at the table obliges.

The dinner elapses over the span of a couple hours. It is spent animatedly, the chit-chat kept alive by Taehyung’s parents and Jungkook’s. The food is good. Divine, even, and Taehyung finds some comfort in it, thinking that if the night is to veer into a literal bloody nightmare, he will at least have a belly full of a newly discovered meal.

Jungkook hasn’t spoken another word since his apology. Instead, it’s his parents who take it upon themselves to reply to the inquiries asked by Dahee and Junhyun. The Prince must be used to this because he distantly smiles and nods, but never provides more than that.

Taehyung is nonplussed by this dynamic. Dragonborns never cultivate this kind of excessively hierarchic relationships. There is a respect given by and to every dragonborn no matter their social rank, wealth and other criteria. They treat their peers with genuine kindness and care. Yet here with the Jeon family, everything feels fabricated, from the floor they walk on to every word their tongues curl around.

“Do give our compliments to the chef,” Junhyun sighs once their dessert is consumed. “It was one of the best meals I have ever gotten the chance to feast on.”

“Was it?” Dahee wonders with a playful frown.

“After yours, Darling."

Dahee pecks Junhyun’s cheek. Jungkook, along with the Queen and King, peer at the display of affection with surprise.

Taehyung discreetly rolls his eyes from where he’s loitering in his chair. He fiddles with the golden rings adorning his fingers as he watches the Queen and King converse with his parents. It's only when he feels a pair of eyes on him that his attention drifts on the Prince.

Jungkook is also leaning against the backrest of his chair, albeit more gracefully than Taehyung. The air of supremacy is worn once more. It grates on Taehyung's nerves.

“Taehyung,” Seohyung calls out, “your mother has mentioned in the past your disdain toward our kind, vehemently confirmed tonight.”

“Disdain is a mitigated way to put it."

“I’m afraid he hangs about in his grandfather’s lair too much. It influences him greatly,” Dahee laments.

“While your dislike for humankind is understandable and built on a complex history, I believe it is time for us to move past it and seal a proper peace anew,” Seohyung starts.

“Your family is one of the most eminent dragonborn ones, so is ours to humans and warlocks,” Sungmin carries on. “Our union, along with other marriages to occur between humans and dragonborns, will solidify the Accords that were signed centuries ago.”

“I still have some difficulties believing that it will,” Taehyung contests. “After all, the Jeon dynasty is the very one that had instigated the Great War, joined forces with other humans and warlocks,

and had proceeded with the decimation of dragonborns."

A billow of coldness rushes through the room.

Seohyung's and Sungmin's veneer of amiability vanishes. However someone has to address the skeletons in the room, and Taehyung has always loved to be the one to do so.

"What happened during the Great War was regrettable, and I unfortunately cannot erase the past abominations my ancestors inflicted upon dragonborns." The Queen's speech is an evidently reenacted one, mechanical and emotionless. "However my family and kingdom are more than willing to amend for them. You have to accept that a token of trust must be given in order to receive one, Taehyung."

"That I abide by," Junhyun agrees. "Our families allying in spite of our history would be a great show of forgiveness. We will bring assets, influence and other exciting merits to each other."

"An alliance is the first step toward an acceptance, a harmony between dragonkind and humankind, rather than a tentative tolerance," Dahee adds. "This marriage will set an example and could be the start of a great friendship."

"I concur," Sungmin nods.

Seohyung mirrors him. "So do I and our son."

"Do you?" The question launched by Dahee is directed at the Prince.

"Yes," Jungkook answers. "I believe it is time for humans and dragonborns to grow. Together."

"What about you, Taehyung?" Seohyung seems to enjoy egging him on because she says "Would you allow yourself to grow past your wrong beliefs toward humans?"

'Wrong beliefs.'

Taehyung has heard humans refer to the Great War with the most inane terms to clean their hands of the blood they have shed, however referring to it as a 'wrong belief' is something else entirely.

"Perhaps," Taehyung says.

"If your hesitation is partially due to Jungkook's behavior, I can assure you that he will be a wonderful asset to your leadership. You will find him quite useful with economical, strategical or political acumen. However he'll be most valuable for social events and relationships he was trained to excel at, as he will also spur many envious gaze toward you that will be advantageous when the time to convince and charm a fellow leader will come."

Taehyung stares, not even bothering to hide his disgust at how distasteful the last addition is. "My husband being my arm candy is more important than anything else?

"Once Jungkook has become your husband, he will be yours to employ and dictate as you see fit. Isn't it right, Jungkook?" Sungmin's eyes crinkle around a smile as he peers at his son, and Taehyung can feel a bile of repulsion crawl at the back of his throat when he imagines that *Seungwon* has probably heard this exact same speech. "What do you say, Taehyung? Would you perhaps like to spend an afternoon with Jungkook?"

All eyes skim on him.

“Time is of the essence, however,” Seohyung interjects. “We cannot afford to wait much longer before a decision has to be made.”

“If so, the assessment of the Prince and I’s compatibility prior to the wedding doesn’t matter,” Taehyung summarizes. “What mutual gain will this association provide?”

“We will cede part of our land to Vanae, as well as access to our libraries and warlocks, among other things we have discussed with your parents.”

Taehyung’s mouth parts open.

Warlocks are rare.

They commonly live in recluse, more specifically away from dragonborns that they fear, and away from humans that they distrust. Warlocks still maintain a better rapport with humans. The two often work together, as they had during the Great War, and this coalition had been the tipping point towards humans’ victory. However warlocks remain elusive and easily swayed, their loyalty given to whichever side seems more prone to win. So if Taehyung has a hard time trusting humans, it is even worse with warlocks.

“What about you?” Taehyung's eyes shift between Seohyung and Sungmin. “What do you gain in return?”

“A seat at the draconic Council as well as a percentage that has yet to be determined of the precious stones your people bring,” Sungmin replies. “We will also require the help of dragons to expand, fend off rivals and other potential threats if they are to arise.”

“Can your warlocks be trusted?”

“The two we detain, yes. One of them is a close friend of Jungkook. Any other questions?”

Detain? Taehyung thinks.

“What about accommodations?”

Taehyung's question takes aback both his parents and Jungkook's.

“Accommodations?”

“I am *not* leaving Vanae for Amaris," Taehyung snips.

Seohyung crosses her arms over her chest, lifting a hand to her chin as she pensively peers at Jungkook. “Arrangements could be made. You and Jungkook could reside between the borders of our lands, preferably closer to the citadel, so that we can easily keep in touch with Jungkook.”

Or rather control him, Taehyung mentally corrects.

“It would be frowned upon if you don’t live together."

“Jungkook could come move in with us in Vanae,” Dahee casually offers with a bright grin.

“ *Hah?”* Taehyung gapes at his mother. His home being invaded by the enemy is where he draws a li— No. A *barricade* of spikes and fire. "What?" Before he can voice out more of his denial, Dahee shushes him with a pinch on his knee.

The Queen herself stammers at the unexpected proposal. “I… I’m not sure it would be a wise idea.”

“Why not,” Junhyun exclaims. “While dragonborns are familiar with humankind’s history and accomplishments, the reverse cannot be said, isn’t it? If Jungkook lives in Vanae with us, it will grant him a direct insight into draconic politics, history, arcane and more,” he adds, and there is this glint of connivance in his gaze that Taehyung catches.

The hand on Taehyung’s knee tugs at the fabric of his pants. Once assured that he can peer down without arousing any suspicion, he does.

Tamed flames flicker at the tip of Dahee’s fingers, the fire shaping around letters.

‘This boy is not safe here.’

Taehyung’s jaw clenches. He darts a look at Jungkook’s parents, the latter discussing together.

“Plus it isn’t as though Jungkook would be a prisoner in our house,” Dahee resumes. “He would, of course, be more than welcome to visit you whenever he’d desire to. He is a free man, after all.”

For the first time tonight, an emotion that isn’t detachment or swift disdain blooms on the Prince’s face. Taehyung can’t really make out what it is, exactly, but Dahee appears to because she gently smiles at Jungkook.

“It could work,” Seohyung muses.

“Yes. Let us try,” Sungmin decides. “We will need to speak with Jungkook beforehand.”

“If Jungkook were to live in Vanae, he would be surrounded by your kind. Dragons,” Seohyung continues.

“Yes, and he would learn a lot from and about us."

“Would he be the only human there?”

“For the most part, yes. Vanae’s population is of dragonborns only aside from the occasional human visitors.”

Seohyung takes a sip of her wine, peering at the liquid that she twirls in the glass. “It goes without saying that nothing drastically unwarranted must happen to this union.”

“I can assure you that your son will be safe with us,” Junhyun says.

“It isn’t necessarily our son we are worried about. We know he will be well,” Sungmin clarifies like the piece of shit that he is. “But it is good to hear nonetheless.”

“I believe we all agree with those parameters for the time being?” Dahee's gaze drags across the table.

Sungmin’s eyes shoot toward Taehyung. “All except for one.”

Taehyung grits his teeth together.

He knows that he can refuse it, that his parents would not be upset or angered about his decision. His mind drifts away from the table. His vision glazes over as he recalls the graveyard under his home. Then he glances at the unreadable Prince.

Taehyung believes that his mother has caught onto the *something* about Jungkook. Or perhaps her apparent personal interest for him is due to the strained relationship between the Prince and his parents, Dahee's impulse to protect and care then awakened. Taehyung does not share much of this concern. He's still unsettled by the cracks he has seen in the Prince's mask: a darkness in Jungkook that may unleash itself one day, and Taehyung does not know if it'll be aimed at him, dragonborns, or the Queen and King.

"May I have some time to deliberate on it? It is a lifetime commitment, and I would like to confer with my parents," Taehyung eventually settles on replying.

"A few days at most, but yes," Seohyung agrees.

"Excellent." Dahee smiles and turns toward Junhyun. "We should leave, Darling, before we overstay our welcome."

"You can rest here for the night, if need be."

"That won't be necessary, thank you. Tonight's fare has revitalized me, and I'm sure the same can be said about Taehyung."

"Yeah." One of Taehyung's knees jumping up and down as he picks at the skin of his thumb. The angsty restlessness at the prospect of finally flying flares up.

"Are you ready to leave, Son?" Dahee asks, her eyes drifting between Taehyung and Jungkook. "Or is there another matter you wish to discuss?"

"I've heard everything I needed."

Not waiting for any permission or cue, Taehyung's chair scrapes across the smooth marble tiles as he rises to his feet. Everyone else follows suit. He throws his cloak on and in the same movement, he retrieves the pouch of chocolate chips that he sneaks in an inner pocket.

Eager to be out of this suffocating citadel that seems to be more of a fancy prison, he marches toward the dining room's entrance doors.

"Thank you for the dinner, it was wonderful," Dahee says once in the garden.

"Thank you for being here," Seohyung smiles. "The company has been unexpectedly amusing."

Taehyung dips his head backward and admires the view. The night sky is full of stars, shining bright alongside the Moon. His lids fall shut, exhausted from the social outing, and he basks in the cold breeze that ruffles his hair, slowly sweeping away the tension from his shoulders.

Jungkook looks to be elsewhere when Taehyung glances at him, the Prince's gaze settled at a point on the outskirts of the garden and river surrounding the citadel.

“Jungkook, it was lovely to see you again.” Dahee steps near him and without any hesitation, she pulls Jungkook in a hug.

Dahee’s face is tucked against Jungkook's tense shoulders who tentatively returns the embrace. She must whisper something to him because a sudden glassiness springs in the Prince's eyes, his lips pressing into a thin line.

Jungkook discreetly nods.

Taehyung frowns.

“Likewise,” Jungkook says as he separates from Dahee, his expression schooled back to neutrality, but the shine in his gaze remains.

“Let us fly home, Son, lest I fall asleep mid flight.”

“If you do, *I* could fly you home, Darling. Although the stakes of me falling asleep then would be much higher, and I believe Taehyung wouldn’t be strong enough to carry me in my dragon form,” Junhyun muses.

“My dear, we would need a thunder to move you in your dragon self,” Dahee teases, earning herself a resounding smack on the rear as Junhyun bursts into a boisterous laughter.

Taehyung grunts a sigh.

“That is true, Darling.”

Dahee pats Junhyun's round belly. “I love you."

“And I you, Darling.”

”Have a great night, Queen Seohyung, King Sungmin,” Junhyun and Dahee both say with a brief bow. “Once more, thank you for your invitation to your beautiful abode.”

“The pleasure was ours,” Seohyung echoes, her lips curved into a tight, uncomfortable curl.

Taehyung internally cackles, suddenly happy about his parents’ shameless flirtations.

“Have a safe flight,” Jungkook says with a smile that seems genuine for once.

Taehyung wordlessly shifts to his dragon counterpart. He heaves a deep rumble of relief when his claws protract while his wings flutter, working out the kinks and incessant soreness in them. After some maneuvering, Junhyun finds his place on his wife’s nape. Dahee lifts off the ground first, remaining afloat as she waits for her son.

Before joining his mother in the sky, Taehyung peers down at the Prince.

Their gazes meet, one of scorn, and the other seeming more. Perhaps even curious.

Taehyung huffs a puff of fire through his nostrils, a petulant gesture to punctuate his departure. He takes off and snorts a chuckle when a gust of dust is propelled toward the Queen and King, the two forced to cover their faces with their arms.

“His parents are revolting,” Taehyung announces when he storms inside his home, throwing his cloak on the coat hanger and removing his combat boots. “I can’t believe they considered Seungwon as a betrothed for their son. *Seungwon?* To this disgusting, sadistic pig? *”* He drapes himself over his recliner, The Armchair, and by the Elders if it isn't eons more comfortable than the dining chairs at Jeon castle.

“From a pragmatic point of view, I can understand why Jungkook’s parents would choose him,” Dahee says. “They would have gained a lot from that wedding, and they obviously have no qualms in sending their son to any griffin’s den. They’re desperate, a reason why they also put up with your behavior.”

“They are so unbelievably despicable. Blew my mind this whole fucking night.”

“Because you are good, my son.”

“Do you really want to be associated with the Jeon family?” Taehyung wonders.

“I’d rather have it be us than someone else. Your father and I can handle Seohyung and Sungmin. Plus the Council has already given their approval.”

“The Council can go eat shi—”

Dahee gently smacks Taehyung’s forehead. “Son.”

“This is absolute nonsense. Of all human families the Council may want, they chose the Jeon?”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” Junhyun affirms, an unusual severity stiffening his demeanor. “This is mainly what it is about. We don’t have much faith in the Jeon family’s loyalty, however they will grant us great benefits while we can keep a cautious eye on them.”

“But it also allows them to do the exact same thing on top of collecting information about us.”

“So will we about them. The Kang Family is engaging their daughter with a human heir as well, and it will continue forth with a couple more marriages.” Dahee perches herself on her husband’s lap. “It *is* time for us to forgive.”

“This is…” Taehyung trails off. His cheeks puff around a sigh.

“Son, you seem to have misheard me, so allow me to repeat myself. We will forgive,” Dahee begins and her timber is low, voice wavering with contained ire, “however we will never, *ever* forget what was done to us. All that humans have taken and stolen from us.”

“What did you say to him?” Taehyung blurts out, half to distract his mother from the upset he has awakened in her, half out of curiosity.

“How so?”

“The Prince. You whispered something to him.”

“He wants to run away from his parents, that much has been evident to your father and I over the course of our sparse visits.”

“Understandably so,” Junhyun mumbles, face etched into a glower. “They never allow him to express himself or speak his mind how he wants to. I hope the poor boy is alright and not being disciplined for his brief outburst of honesty tonight.”

“What did you *exactly* tell the Prince?” Taehyung pushes. He narrows his eyes at his mother when her mischievous gaze settles at a point away from Taehyung in faux innocence.

“Well.” Dahee pauses. For dramatic effect, Taehyung suspects. “I told him that if you were to deny the marriage, I would steal him from his parents. Kidnap him, if you will. Consensually and discreetly, of course.”

Taehyung blinks once, twice, and a third time, in case his mother is a mirage concocted by his lunatic mind. “Mother, have you finally gone mad?”

“Darling, you cannot kidnap the heir to the Jeon throne,” Junhyun chastises but it’s melted down by the fond smile that stretches his lips.

“As I said, it would be agreed upon. I want to help him. And I like him.”

“I don’t and jeopardizing the whole clan for one single human is mindless,” Taehyung counters.

“I've raised you better than this, Taehyung.”

“You've raised me to do everything in my power to protect my people.”

“I want to consider humans as our people as well. Not every human is bad, just like not every dragonborn is good. The world isn’t so cut in black and white.”

“Every human I've met was either greedy and cruel, or a megalomaniac unable to see further than the tip of their nose."

“We have similar kinds of pricks among dragonborns. You think too highly of yourself and our kind,” Dahee scolds. “We have taught you humbleness, not what behavior you’ve been exhibiting lately.”

Taehyung sighs. He's been doing so more often than not lately. “I know, I’m just—” He rubs a palm down his face. “I can’t bring myself to suddenly be fine with humans invading our lives that had been peaceful.”

“We know, Son."

“I don’t trust humans. I most certainly don’t trust the Jeon rulers and neither do I trust their son.”

“You could make some effort to—”

“Should I remind you of what happened to me the last time I tried to make an effort for a human? Because you seem to have forgotten about it. I haven’t. Every damn day and night the pain and nightmares mangle me. A constant reminder that I unfortunately can’t discard as easily as you have.”

Tremors ripple through Taehyung. His nails sink into his palms and he anchors on the stinging prickle to not let himself be swarmed by the memories harassing his mind. The ache on his back heightens, as though called forth. He rolls his shoulders to alleviate it.

“Humans *humiliated* me that day, and if it hadn't been for myself, the Elders and that one warlock who helped me, I—” Taehyung’s teeth clamp down on the inside of his cheek. Blood suffuses his tongue, his fists clenching and relaxing every few seconds. “They’ll backstab us, eventually. It’s only a matter of when, not if.”

“My son…” Dahee steps forward to crouch in front of Taehyung. She grabs a hold of his hands, coaxing the stiff fingers to come loose. “We know, Taehyung. We expect it to happen. But we will be ready when it does come. *If* it does, because I still hold onto some hope that people can change and be better.”

“What if it happens and we aren’t ready?”

“Then we will die defending what is ours. Our legacy,” Junhyun says as he pushes himself off the couch. Dahee hums in approval. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“We’re taking so many risks."

“We have to.” Dahee waits for Junhyun to be out of earshot to add “With the plague.”

“We should tell Dad. I don’t want to keep this secret from him.”

“I will speak to the Elders tomorrow, and then to your father. However your father is an intelligent man. I know he suspects that I am hiding something from him, but he trusts me.”

“Alright,” Taehyung concedes, too tired to argue any further, what semblance of energy he had left vanished.

“As for the wedding, if you truly do not wish to go through it, tell me. I will warn the Jeon family.”

“Here, Son,” Junhyun says and Taehyung looks up at his father who’s handing him a gauze doused with some liquid ointment. “For your palms.”

“Thank you.”

Dahee straightens up and finds her place perched on Junhyun’s legs again while Taehyung cleans the small specks of blood off his skin. His thoughts derail to the Prince, to the similar sight he had seen on Jungkook’s palms.

“What about the Prince?”

“What about him?”

“You want to help him.”

“Yes, as much as possible, and while I agree that we mustn’t underestimate him nor what he’s capable of, I have a good gut feeling about him.”

“Yeah, and the gut feeling is the one of him cleaving a dagger through your stomach."

Dahee produces a tiny ball of fire that she flings at Taehyung. The fireball faintly singes the front of Taehyung's shirt and he pouts as he swipes the smudge of ashes. Feeling revengeful, he toggles through the roulette of his arcane that slots on an element. He forms a flimsy bolt of lightning that he fires at his mother.

"How dare you attack your own mother," Dahee frowns and pokes the bolt that fizzles in the air.

"You started it," Taehyung shrugs but regrets it when it tugs at the tightness in his skin. Then, he emits a long, drawn out grunt and sags in his seat. "I never dreamed of finding a good mate I like. You know I don't care about any of that, but I had *one* standard: a dragonborn betrothed."

"If you're this adamant about it, perhaps you could build mechanical wings to attach on Jungkook's back so that he can fly with you," Dahee quips. Junhyun, who had dozed off, barks out a laughter.

"And then you wonder why I'm such a little shit," Taehyung mumbles through pursed lips.

"Like mother, like son." Dahee's chin juts up in pride.

Junhyun emits a happy sigh. "I love you both so, so dearly."

"I love you too, Darling."

"Love you," Taehyung slurs through a wide yawn.

"I feel for this boy," Junhyun says.

"If the marriage happens, we will take him away from a potentially abusive home. That is also to take into account even if I know you don't like Jungkook much," Dahee addresses Taehyung.

"I despise his parents even more. They're so… They made my skin crawl in the span of one meeting. The Queen is the worst. She gives me the heebie-jeebies. And there's also something about the Prince."

"You've noticed as well," Dahee smiles.

"Hm? Noticed what?" Junhyun wonders, waking up enough to peep at his mate.

"I believe Jungkook holds a darkness in his heart that he carefully buries deep down. Or maybe it's a penchant for... Hmm." Dahee pauses, tapping her chin with her index. "For chaos? Perhaps? However only if provoked and warranted. Like the wonderful earlobe tale."

"A chaos?" Taehyung echoes.

"I cannot find another way to phrase it."

"The thing about him is that, for the most part, he knows how he is expected to behave. What he should say or not, what he should and shouldn't do. Means he's a good performer and liar. Like a damn vixen. A sly, cunning fox."

"Taehyung, you do realize that vixen, when used for a human and not to refer to the female fox, usually means that you find them irritable yet sexual attractive, right?"

Taehyung glares at his mother as a heat creeps up his neck. “Backtracking on what I just said and entirely ignoring what *you* just said. Jungkook is a— A—” He stops to mull over for a second. “A viper.” He nods to himself. “Sly. Cunning. Slithering their way everywhere to strike when you least expect it. Yada yada.”

“You don’t know this boy, Taehyung. You’re misjudging him."

“What I mean is that he’s hiding something. And his true self."

“We all are to some extent,” Dahee rebuts.

“I’m not,” Junhyun says.

“Except you, Darling,” Dahee laughs and kisses her mate. “But I understand, and we will be cautious with Jungkook. We’ll ensure that what secret he suppresses isn’t aimed at us, although I’m fairly certain we’re at the bottom of his list of vendetta, if he has one.”

“Yeah. I guess his parents are first,” Taehyung concedes.

“Indeed.”

A silence floats in the room.

Taehyung thinks and thinks and *thinks* some more, then he breaks the quietude with a heaved *'Fuck.'*

“Is this ‘fuck’ a sign of another tantrum of yours or a decision made?” Dahee inquires with an amused lilt.

“Both."

“Oh?”

Taehyung can already tell that he’ll regret his choice. However he has taken everything into account: the trust in his parents, the plague, the Elder’s words of wisdom as well as the atrocious Queen and King.

And so Taehyung makes a decision, one that he hopes won’t turn around to bite him in the ass.

“I’ll marry the heir of the Jeon dynasty.”

Chapter End Notes

As I'm writing and updating the story, I'm gobsmacked by the size of this first chapter. Very promising for the length of the full story... I hope you've enjoyed this kind of introducing chapter, thank you for reading and comments are always appreciated 🤍

❧ Twitter

🍁 Twitter thread of all the characters' visuals: characters.
🍁 Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH1.

— Characters' Visuals —

Taehyung
Taehyung's dragon form
Size of Taehyung's dragon form
Jungkook
Jimin
Namjoon
Seokjin
Hoseok
Yoongi

Dahee
Junhyun
Size of Junhyun's dragon form
Minsoo

— Chapter's Visuals —

Taehyung's cloak
Taehyung's outfit for the dinner
Jungkook's suit

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Taehyung in his winter cloak made by numeropito

Chapter 2: The Departure

Chapter Summary

> Taehyung and his family are tasked to help Jungkook move out to Vanae, as arranged during last week's meeting. It all only partially go according to plan.

Chapter Notes

> **Cw:**
>
> **1) Brief anxiety attack.**
> **Starts at "Taehyung is one step away from bolting out...", ends at = "Dahee must feel his discomfort because..."**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"No fucking way."

"Yes fucking damn way."

Jimin bursts into a loud, *infuriating* laughter that resounds in Taehyung's head. Even after five minutes has passed, Jimin is still cackling, tears streaming down his face in a sight so ghastly that Taehyung closes his eyes to escape it. To Taehyung's happiness, Jimin's saliva must go down the wrong pipe because his hilarity is cut short by a strangled sound. Jimin erupts into a series of wet coughs.

Taehyung secretly hopes that they may lead to a certain, long awaited death.

"By the Elders," Jimin breathlessly says after a while.

"Are you done?"

Jimin barks out a ragged laugh before turning his smile into a playful severity. "I am now. I still had a bit of amusement left in me."

Taehyung glowers at the sky from where he's laid down.

He and Jimin are loitering at their favorite hang out spot. It's buried inside Vanae's forest, on a short but deep cliff that overviews a river underneath. Taehyung adores this secluded place, one he and his best friend use as some sort of confessional to vent and rant about anything and everything. Right now, however, he has half a mind to grab Jimin by the back of his shirt and toss him in the

river. Jimin would easily survive. So Taehyung ponders on this for a moment before he's disrupted from his musing by the protagonist of it.

"I can't believe you agreed."

"You and I both. Mom told the Jeon family already, so it's set in stone. In scorching, blazing stones from Hell."

"When's the wedding?"

Taehyung shrugs. "No clue. We're not even in the planning phase of it yet."

"But it's *happening,* happening? As in, no backpedaling from this now?"

"Yeah..."

"Honestly," Jimin starts and drops on the ground next to Taehyung. "I thought you'd end up single for the rest of your life while still living at your parents' house. I could never imagine you in a relationship, let alone married."

"I *am* single. Just married. There's a subtlety there."

Taehyung isn't in denial.

He simply believes that, even if on the papers he will be wed to Amaris' Prince, he technically won't be in love with him nor any of that nonsense, and therefore will remain blissfully single until he finds a mate. Not that he wants to find one, but it could happen in sheer dumb luck.

Jimin surveys Taehyung with disbelief. "Do you not hear how nonsensical that subtlety is or what?"

"The marriage is… It's to bring assets. It's a *duty.* That doesn't mean I'm obliged to love the Prince aside from the moments where I'll have to pretend I do."

"Does the Prince think the same?"

"Who knows with him. He's as readable as a blank sheet of paper yet as malleable as a wet one. Pisses me off."

"I've never seen him. What does he look like?"

"A stuck up prick," is Taehyung's immediate response, received with a pinch that he reciprocates with one of his own. "He is."

"Give my imagination something to work with. Come on."

"You'll see him soon."

A smile stretches on Jimin's mouth, one that Taehyung regards with cautiousness. "How soon?"

"Whenever he'll be moving to Vanae. Then he'll be here all the time, unfortunately. Although I'll __"

“Yes, yes, you'll ignore him, I know the song. Now,” Jimin starts and sways his legs back and forth behind him, “tell me what my future friend looks like.”

“He’s…” Taehyung waves a hand around. “He has big yet sharp eyes? Black, short hair. And several piercings on his ears. I don’t know.”

Jimin levels Taehyung with a stony stare. “That is the most generic description you could give me."

“You’ll see him."

“Is he pretty?”

So.

The thing is, Taehyung wants to answer this with a carefully crafted — and childish — insult toward humans’ hideousness and how contagious it may be. However he stops for a moment. An image of the Prince’s face flickers in his mind. He's not silent for very long, barely two or three seconds at most, but this beat of muteness condemns him.

Jimin gasps right as Taehyung is about to speak.

“He *is* pretty!”

“No.”

“He totally is!”

“I said no!”

“You paused!” Jimin points an accusing finger at Taehyung that the latter nearly bites off. “That’s one of your telltale signs that you’re thinking of lying, or that you're about to lie. I know you. Oh he must be gorgeous to have you fumble like that.”

“I didn’t fumble shit and he’s alright I guess. Shut up now.”

Jimin laughs.

Taehyung throws an arm over his face to shield himself from the bright rays of light, the sun bathing the cliff.

His mind has been preoccupied by the plague.

Trying to find any semblance of helpful information has been a fruitless endeavor thus far. He had considered sharing with Jimin the knowledge of the plague — as, if he is to trust someone with this, it is with the man that he considers a brother — but he had refused to go against his mother and the Elders' request to keep this hushed.

Life at home has been a hectic mess.

A little over a week has passed since the atrocious meeting at the Jeon citadel and Taehyung’s agreement to the wedding. Dahee and Junhyun are often gone from the house to refine the details of their arrangements, meaning that Taehyung's days are split between his personal duties, taking

over his mother as Vanae's leader, and handling his hunting squadrons to help provide meat or other necessities for the awaited rough winter.

Taehyung has thankfully not seen Jungkook, Seohyung or Sungming again, partially because he has refused to. He's been festering a profound denial about his upcoming wedding while being swamped with work and research, a feat that he does not hesitate to use as a scapegoat for his lack of participation in the marriage's settlements.

Crackles erupt on Taehyung's left, tugging him out of his musings.

He moves his arm to survey Jimin who's producing metal from his hands. The small, ragged ball of iron hovers in his palms before dropping on the grass. Taehyung has seen the process countless times, yet the ease in which Jimin works still fascinates him: there are tamed flames surrounding the tips of Jimin's fingers, used then to melt and shape the metal into what Taehyung is recognizing as the head of a wolf.

By the time Jimin completes his sculpture, the sun has moved away from the cliff, chilling Taehyung.

"We should get home," Taehyung says and rises up. "The parents are back today."

"I miss Dahee and Junnie." Jimin pouts. "Haven't seen them and you in weeks."

"How was work at the Seven Isles?"

"The usual," JImin shrugs. "Had a lot of commissions to handle, but the interesting kind for once, not thousands of spoons," he grumbles, eliciting a chuckle from Taehyung. "It was lonely though."

"If it's any consolation, Mom and Dad missed you a lot too. Especially Dad. He wouldn't stop asking when you'd come back. He teared up about it this week," Taehyung snorts. "You'd think you died with how he has been moping around."

Jimin slings an arm around Taehyung's shoulders then says "Isn't it crazy how your parents love me more than you?" Jimin emits a pained sound when Taehyung elbows him in the ribs. "Asshole."

Taehyung flashes a wicked grin at Jimin. "Race to the house."

Without waiting for any approval at the sudden challenge, Taehyung shifts to his dragon self and bolts away. Jimin's yells of indignation veer into growls as he turns into a medium sized dragon, iron scales shining in the sunlight.

The race is quick and rambunctious. Taehyung and Jimin attempt to throw the other off or disturb each other's balance in the sky through lighthearted bites and not so playful shoves. It finishes with Taehyung as the winner, and Jimin is peeved.

"You cheated and went off before me," Jimin groans and shoulders Taehyung out of his way.

"Excuses, excuses. Maybe if you—"

The door of Taehyung's home swings open with a shouted *'Son!'* .

"Jiminie!"

“Junnie!”

Jimin dashes toward Taehyung’s parents — and Jimin's adopted one, in a way —, soon engulfed in a hug that looks suffocating from the outside. Taehyung’s lips curve around a smile, the tightness that had resided in his chest for the past few weeks soothing now that his family is reunited.

“Has Taehyung told you about the marriage?” Dahee's smile settles on Jimin before drifting toward Taehyung that she pulls into a brief embrace.

“I learned about it when I came back today. Here.” Jimin presented the wolf head statuette to Junhyun. "A gift."

“It is exciting, isn’t it? The wedding will be beautiful,” Junhyun says then brings the figure closer to his face, his praises intersected by awed *‘Ooh’* s when Jimin shows Junhyun a detail in the wolf’s irises. “Gorgeous work as always, Jiminie. I will add it to our collection.”

“Speaking of gorgeous,” Jimin begins, hanging onto Dahee’s arm.. Taehyung, aware of where this is leading to, makes his escape to enter his home, followed by his parents and Jimin. “What does the prince look like? Taehyung won’t say anything relevant about him.”

“Oh he is absolutely stunning,” Dahee giggles, and Jimin echoes her. “A rare beauty. You will see for yourself very soon. He’s incredibly smart as well. I like him.”

“If you do, I probably will too."

“Taehyung unfortunately doesn’t share the sentiment. Yet."

“Ever,” Taehyung corrects, ignoring the sly smile Jimin throws his way. “I’ll fix us some drinks, what do you want?”

A chorus of requests answers him.

Taehyung makes his way to the kitchen where he grabs a glass pot of coffee beans that he grinds with relaxed ease, and it’s a bit silly, how much he loves doing this.

Taking care of and providing for those he holds close to his heart has always been something Taehyung cherishes. He isn’t the most adept man when it comes to articulating his love, and he used to find it quite difficult to bond with his peers, then sustain said bonds, however his duties as Vanae’s future leader, his parents and Jimin’s extroverted enthusiasm have helped him come out of this wary and protective shell he'd cast around himself.

To some extent, at least.

So Taehyung hums to himself as he works on supplying the beverages for the group lounging in the living room, his happiness swelling at the sound of his family’s. He pivots against the kitchen counter minutes later, peering ahead with a smile floating on his lips while the drinks are being brewed.

“How has your trip been, Son?” Junhyun asks.

“Great! But can we please skip this unimportant chat and instead focus on the interesting matter at hand, more specifically the wedding?” Jimin dismisses, settled on a recliner.

Junhyun bursts into laughter.

“When is it? What’s happening now? I need to be up to date.”

“Well... For one, we will have quite the busy day tomorrow, as Jungkook will come live here with us.”

What semblance of levity within Taehyung disappears at the remembrance.

“It has been a rather tedious endeavor to convince Amaris’ Queen and King, but they've finally agreed.”

“So soon?” Jimin inquires, voicing out Taehyung’s concerns.

“We thought it wise to have it done earlier than later, lest the Queen and King change their mind as they have several times since we first brought this subject to them."

“Why would they change their mind about this? Isn't it an expected tradition for married couples to live together?” Jimin says.

“Jungkook’s parents are… peculiar."

“Absolutely terrible would be closer to the truth,” Taehyung interjects. “I can’t imagine how worse it may be behind closed doors.”

“That bad?”

“Yeah, they’re disgusting pigs,” Taehyung grimaces. “I don’t like the Prince nor humans in general, but the way they treat him is vile.”

“They see Jungkook as an inanimate asset that must fulfill his duties no matter the cost," Dahee agrees. "So we want to help Jungkook, even more now that he has become Taehyung’s betrothed. Having him out of the citadel as soon as possible is one of our current priorities.”

Jimin pensively stares ahead, a sympathetic frown knitting his face. “I had no clue Amaris’ rulers were that bad. I only assumed they were strict at worst from what I heard.”

“They treat their people quite well and try to see to their needs, that we have to grant them,” Junhyun starts. “It unfortunately does not extend to their own son.”

“I see.” Jimin quietens for a moment before saying “So the move happens tomorrow?”

“Yes, late afternoon. Taehyung and I will be flying Jungkook and his belongings to Vanae,” Dahee explains.

“I’m surprised you agreed to this with how blasé you are about the wedding,” Jimin says to Taehyung.

“I hadn’t at first.” Taehyung is reminded of the strong argument he had had with his mother last weekend that had ended with a fuming and defeated participant — Taehyung —, and a victorious, pompous one — Dahee. “But it’ll be good in dragonborns’ eyes if I help my betrothed move in, I suppose. It would raise questions if I don’t.”

“Plus there will be many curious visitors tomorrow,” Dahee adds. “The Queen and King will open the citadel’s gates and allow Amaris’ people to bid farewell to their Prince.”

“Can I join? I want to see the Prince. And the citadel. I’ve never been in a place like that before,” Jimin smiles, and even if Taehyung is already dreading the invasion of his abode, Jimin’s evident excitement at the prospect still somewhat placates Taehyung’s discontentment.

“I’ll need moral support anyway.” Taehyung turns around and lines up four cups to pour their beverages in.

“You’re about to marry a smart *and* pretty Prince. You, 'who don’t care about love',” Jimin says with a deepened voice and glower that do *not* reflect Taehyung whatsoever, “should be grateful to be this lucky in an arranged marriage.”

Taehyung huffs. He lifts his burden from the counter and marches to the living room to hand everyone their cup before plopping down in The Armchair. “I’ll be tied for life to a human. There’s nothing lucky about it.”

“True. But you agreed to this, so suck it up,” Jimin tuts, earning himself a kick on the shin. “So he and the Prince will live in this house with you two?”

“No, it would be quite inappropriate,” Dahee chuckles. “They will live in the one we had built a few minutes away.”

“Ooh, makes sense.”

His mother’s response hits Taehyung anew with the reality that he will have to move out of his childhood house.

The second house had been constructed years ago by Taehyung and his family in preparation for his departure that has never really occurred. His parents had always expressed their appreciation to have him home, and Taehyung’s motivation to leave had been further quelled by the few times Junhyun would tear up whenever Taehyung would dare mention anything regarding the second house.

The two stories house is fully built, however it holds close to no furniture, a problem that Taehyung and the Prince will have to remedy soon.

“No one has ever been there since it was finished though. It must be dusty."

“Which is why you’re here.” Taehyung takes a sip of his milked coffee. “To be useful and help me clean it.”

“Do I look like your maid?”

“You sure sound like one.” Taehyung easily dodges the kick Jimin aims his way. He summons his arcane to zap Jimin’s forehead whose head jerks backward.

Dahee flips two fireballs on Taehyung and Jimin's noses, effectively interrupting what was about to become a brawl between the two friends. “Junhyun and I will help as well.”

“Shall we start? The earlier we begin, the earlier it'll be done."

“Yeah,” Taehyung sighs. “Let’s.”

“You’ll need furniture as well, my son,” Junhyun remarks and walks to the entrance door, cup still in his hands.

“I’ll check that later with the Prince.”

“Ehh, listen to you being such a considerate and thoughtful husband already,” Jimin teases in a high pitched voice, a hand on his mouth. “Taking into account your betrothed’s needs and wishes, how quaint. How *precious*. Will you debate together on the color of the kitchen’s curtains?”

“I can’t believe you’re managing to be even more obnoxious than you already are. Truly a feat the Elders would be gobsmacked by."

“Oh I’m barely starting.” Jimin snickers. "Now, Mom, I want to know everything that was told about the wedding. Don’t spare any detail, please.”

“My dear,” Dahee curls an arm around one of Jimin’s, leading him outside. “You would not believe how entertaining the dinner with the Jeon family proved itself to be. It is a memory I deeply cherish.”

“Tell me, tell me."

With a shake of his head, Taehyung watches the two blabbermouths skip down the path guiding them to the second house.

Junhyun makes a noncommittal sound that Taehyung reads as one of sympathy. He pats Taehyung’s back. “It will be a good exercise. I will bake us some pastries to reinvigorate us half way through.”

That addition catches Taehyung’s attention. “Croissant? With blueberry jam?”

“And almond on top, yes, my son,” Junhyun chuckles, ruffling Taehyung’s hair.

Taehyung smiles, uncaring of his now tousled strands, and he watches Junhyun join the rest of the family.

Taehyung has concocted an infallible plan for Jungkook's arrival in Vanae: a complete, and unwavering ignorance of the Prince's existence.

It's easy, right? It won't demand anything from Taehyung, and Jungkook will be allowed to do whatever it is that the heir of Amaris' throne does, away from the despicable Queen and King. Plus Taehyung is not alone and has his family to support him if any problem arises, and with these thoughts in mind, Taehyung wonders if this upcoming married life may be more bearable than what he had first envisioned.

“Is everyone ready to go?”

“Dibs on Junnie!”

Jimin shifts to his dragon form. He snatches a laughing Junhyun on his way, the latter still chuckling as he's thrown on Jimin's back.

The two fly off in a gust of wind.

"Those fools…" Dahee sighs.

"Jimin will probably be of no help for the return since he'll spend his time exhausting himself playing with Dad."

"Definitely," Dahee says with a smile that Taehyung mirrors, albeit more faintly. "How are you faring, Son?"

Taehyung's lips press into a thin line. "I don't know, honestly. The past week went by in a blur. I barely remember what I've been doing with how occupied my mind has been."

"It has been a lot, hasn't it?"

"I'm researching about you know what, but I found nothing. Maybe we will now that we have access to Jeon's library? I doubt they'll have anything that could help us, but…"

"It has been my hope as well. However, while I understand you're striving to unearth any knowledge about it, do not forget yourself in the process, Taehyung. The matter has been plaguing us for a long time now." Dahee regards him with warmth, and Taehyung can't refrain his snort at the distasteful pun. "You shouldn't let it mangle your mind nor stop you from living your life."

"I'll try not to."

"You'll be busy with your betrothed and the wedding anyway. I cannot wait."

"Say, has the Prince ever mentioned having a page or someone like that?"

"I believe he has an attendant, like every prince would. Why?"

"I'm wondering if he'll bring them with him or not."

"I hadn't thought of that," Dahee muses, arms folded over her chest. "I suppose that if it is to happen, it will be a brief while after you and Jungkook have settled down properly. Let us ask him today. If someone knows, it is Jungkook."

"Yeah."

"I visited Naeun and Joonho a few days ago to announce the news," Dahee suddenly says.

Taehyung freezes on his spot.

"They've been well and happy. They've asked about you," Dahee carries on, her gaze drifting on Taehyung. "They miss you, Son. You should visit them too."

Taehyung misses the couple as well, the one that used to take care of him when his parents were away or busy with work. However the sole idea of entering the couple's house, of seeing them and hearing them, wrenches at a place in his heart where a searing guilt sits, acute and alive, even years

after. "Maybe another time," he dismisses as he has countless times for a decade. "We should leave before Dad and Jimin accidentally kill one another.”

Dahee doesn't push on the subject. She never does. Instead she pecks Taehyung's forehead, the two of them soon soaring through the sky.

Amaris is brimming with humans, and Taehyung internally flinches at the view below him.

Masses are walking through the roads and boulevards paved in elegant stones, some of the people from Amaris itself, however also from neighboring towns, if the discrepancies in styles are any indication. The departure of the Prince appears to be treated as a festivity. A street market of plethora of food, clothes and jewelry lines the main avenue, stretching as far as inside the public square facing the entrance of the citadel’s garden.

Taehyung had not expected that, in spite of his mother’s warnings.

Is the celebration born from the advantages the marriage will bring to them? Or is it due to the fact that the Prince will now be away from their home? Or something else?

Taehyung catches Jimin and their parents in the corner of his eyes, the only dragonborns flying over the city. To Taehyung’s relief, Dahee leads them to the fenced backyard, away from prying eyes and the rush of humans.

The area is even more vast than the public square. The courtyard is an ensemble of perfectly trimmed grass and smooth, rosy cobblestones, the interior enclosed by high walls and a set of double doors opened to the forest. Servants are bustling around in a hurried buzz, dashing and walking to and from the citadel. A dozen or so of carriages and carts are filling the place and being loaded with wooden crates of different sizes.

Taehyung’s group lowers to the ground.

Eyes dart on them. The maids pause in their chores to gawk at the small thunder of dragons. Taehyung and the others shift mid air to land on their feet as humans.

“By the Elders.” Jimin twirls around and observes the area. “Everything is so…”

Yeah.

Taehyung can relate to that thought without needing to hear the rest of it. “Careful not to squash a golden handkerchief and accidentally start a war."

“I’d easily charm them out of said war.”

The group makes their way toward the Citadel.

The restlessness that had ignited within Taehyung remains in his chest, a heavy weight that is thankfully tamed now that he’s at the back of the citadel. While the maids scurry past him a tad too close sometimes, they aren’t as numerous as the suffocating crowd at the front.

“Oh! I see him." Junhyun breaks into a grin. "Prince Jungkook!”

The Prince swivels around like, well, *a damned Prince,* the movement so fluid and graceful that his long, light blue overcoat perfectly arcs behind him. It's as if the motion has been practiced for years on end, and Taehyung is certain it has been. He can imagine the ridiculous sight of the Prince rehearsing something as mundane as turning around with the sole goal of showing off how well *he* can do it. Because he's a vain bastard like that.

The Prince seems to like monochrome outfits because he’s clad in a baby blue, three piece suit accentuated by gold touches, similar to the apparel he had adorned during his and Taehyung’s first meeting. The ruby necklace is fastened around the neck, impossible to miss against the opposing color.

The Prince grins to a servant, speaking with her for a brief moment.

Taehyung recognizes her as Sohee, the chocolate chip smuggler. Her eyes meet his and when they do, she bows to him with a small smile, one that he tentatively reciprocates.

Humans may be despicable, but Sohee had been nice to Taehyung and given him chocolate, so Taehyung, like a seven years old tamed by candies, shoves down his contempt.

The Prince joins the group of four with purposeful steps. The weird gaze happens again: Jungkook makes a swift once over of Taehyung’s form, however not fast enough for Taehyung to miss it.

Taehyung knows that he has made even less effort than last time to dress properly. He has opted for an all black apparel consisting of his boots, combat pants and a long sleeved, tight fitting shirt. He had assumed that the Prince wouldn’t be as hung up on proper garments as his harpy of a mother, yet the latter clearly is if his riveted gaze is any indication.

Dahee, like the mischievous ray of sunshine that she is, is radiating with joy. She hugs the Prince who reciprocates the greeting, although a tad more awkwardly. “It is good to see you, Jungkook."

“Likewise,” Jungkook says and lets go of Dahee.

“How have you been?” Junhyun pipes up.

“Happy and excited. Busy with packing everything up.”

“You’re bringing many goods with you.”

At his mother’s observation, Taehyung *really* takes in the place and amount of carriages crammed with crates. He frowns before peering at the Prince.

“Ah… Yes.” Jungkook has the decency to look sheepish, his gaze cast low. “I have quite a lot of clothes, among other things.”

“There’s no shame in that. You should see Junhyun’s wardrobe," Dahee chuckles. "It surpasses mine, and Elders know I, myself, am fond of fashion and couture due to some of our friends.”

Taehyung tunes out the conversation to scrutinize Jungkook.

The Prince holds himself differently. He appears and even sounds more… laid-back? Buoyant? Overall less tense, as though a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. Taehyung questions what

it could be, if the answer is as simple as parting away from the Queen and King, or if it's a secret kept hushed.

“Where are you parents?” Dahee inquires.

“They’re at the entrance gates with the visitors and some neighboring noble families that have come to witness my departure,” Jungkook explains. “They will greet you shortly, however they won’t have the time to stay with us for long.”

“Good. You deserve an endless break from them,” Junhyun whispers, the phrase punctuated by conspiratorial wink. “I hope you aren’t too nervous about leaving home.”

“I am. A little bit. But… Uhm.” Jungkook glances around, and Taehyung understands why as Jungkook only continues his thought when no servants are within earshot. “I’m mostly relieved. To leave. I hadn’t—” He gnaws on his lower lip. “I hadn’t thought it would happen. That they would allow it.”

Taehyung has never seen the poised Prince fumble over his words this way. Not that he has a lot of meetings to compare it to — only one —, but still. It’s strange. Perhaps Amaris’ rulers are a lot worse than what Taehyung had first assumed.

“Junhyun and I have been doing our best to convince your parents about the benefits of your residence in Vanae."

“I know... They told me a couple days ago and— Thank you.” Jungkook grabs one of Dahee’s hands, cradling it between his own hands. “Thank you.”

“Not for that, Dear.” Dahee is about to say more but is cut by Jimin who had wandered off.

“Oh.” Jimin watches Jungkook with hawk eyes. His gaze darts on Taehyung. “He *is* beautiful, you were right.”

Jungkook’s eyebrows raise while Taehyung’s furrow. “He said that?”

“I never did,” Taehyung promptly denies.

“Hi! My name’s Park Jimin,” Jimin introduces himself, shaking Jungkook’s hand. “I’m basically Taehyung’s big brother.”

“I’m Jeon Jungkook, Amaris’ Prince.”

“You’re not even three months older than me,” Taehyung retorts. “Stop referring to yourself as my big brother, it’s embarrassing."

“But I am older than you. Wiser, smarter. Prettier too."

“And a lot more delusional."

Jimin, as he often does, kicks Taehyung’s rear, but Taehyung, seeing this coming from a mile away, manages to wedge a leg between his friend’s. Jimin nearly trips, finding his equilibrium just in time to avoid a fall. “Watch it, asshole, or I’ll singe your ass.”

“You can try."

“Children, focus on the task at hand.” Dahee intervenes. “What left has to be done?”

“Not a lot,” Jungkook muses. “We have to finish moving the remainder of the crates inside the free carts. Since you warned me that the house Taehyung and I will live in is missing furniture, I thought it would be good to bring some of mine.”

“It is indeed,” Junhyun nods. “Let us help, everyone.”

Taehyung and the rest follow Jungkook through the paths carved amidst the lawn.

Jimin leans close to Taehyung to murmur “What if the grass is made of thinned emerald?”

Taehyung knows it’s a joke, but he frankly wouldn’t put it past Amaris' rulers.

“I wouldn’t put it past you know who,” Dahee replies.

Taehyung barks out a laugh at his mother voicing out hers and Taehyung's thoughts without any qualms. Jungkook’s head twists to peer at him. Taehyung reflexively schools his expression back into its common scowl. Jungkook faces ahead again, and Taehyung counts that as a victory.

“Damn, so we can joke about the Queen and King in front of Jungkook? We won’t get beheaded for that capital offense?” Jimin wonders.

“You’re more than welcome to say anything you want about them,” Jungkook assures. “Be aware that I’ll be mentally joining you in the festivities.”

“Ehh,” Jimin draws out. “So you have shitty parents too?”

“The Queen and King are great rulers. They want what is good for their prosperity."

Jimin tilts his head, visibly confused. Taehyung, on the other hand, understands the connotation behind Jungkook’s evasive words, and how they echo with what Taehyung had said at the dinner. It's confirmed when Jungkook glances in Taehyung’s direction.

“There isn’t much left to carry,” Jungkook announces.

They’ve entered a large hall occupied with a few wooden boxes scattered around. “Are you bringing the whole citadel with you?” Taehyung grumbles.

“No,” Jungkook says, either unaware of the rhetoric in the question or choosing to ignore it. “Only my own belongings along with additional necessities to avoid buying if it’s not needed. And some furniture, as I mentioned.”

“Shall we begin?” Junhyun proposes.

“You really don’t need to aid us," Jungkook says. "The helpers and I can take care of it.”

“Nonsense. It’ll be faster if you have dragonborns assisting you.” Junhyun gestures at Taehyung and Jimin. “Sons, give them a hand.”

Taehyung strides to the nearest crates. He tugs his sleeves up his forearms. He crouches and makes a move to grab the wide, square box, but he's disrupted by a nagging Prince.

“Wait. This one has a lot of heavy things and a dismantled wardrobe in it, as well as—”

Taehyung, without breaking a sweat — or a bone, for that matter —, effortlessly picks up the crate with one hand, catching an edge with the other one to secure it on his shoulder. He makes sure to pointedly stare at Jungkook as he does so, their eyes locked on each other. He even mouths off the Prince with a flippant little motion of his brow.

Jungkook’s lips part around nothing. He rotates on his feet to survey Taehyung’s parents and Jimin achieving the exact same prowess Taehyung had. Dahee carries a crate that is almost twice her size after Junhyun says that it is too heavy for him and his sore back. The maids are astonished by the show of strength as well, those in the vicinity stopping to stare at a smiling Dahee.

The Prince studies Taehyung. “I didn’t know dragonborns were *that* strong?”

Taehyung walks toward Jungkook. Not near to intentionally whack the Prince with a corner of the box, but close enough where he *could* if need be. “And what is it that you know about us, Viper,” he says with defiance, the question sounding more like an accusation.

“Not a lot, but I want to learn.”

“My dear, are you sure it isn’t too heavy?” Junhyun worries as he walks by.

“I’m stronger than you, Darling,” Dahee huffs.

Taehyung uses this distraction to step around the Prince and climb down the perron.

After a rapid inspection, he finds a carriage to wedge his box in. Once in front of it, he notices how well arranged everything is. He clicks his tongue. He’s about to leave the box inside when he hears the voice that he will regretfully become familiar with.

“Can you leave it in this carriage, please?”

Taehyung turns to face the Prince. “It fits in this one.”

“I know, but I’m trying to optimize space and weight, so that we can use as few carriages as possible while ensuring that the ropes hold the weight during the trip.”

So the Prince is also some kind of spacing engineer and the one that has conducted the whole packing process.

Eager to leave Amaris, and not wishing to argue for something so unimportant, Taehyung complies to Jungkook’s request. He follows the Prince as the latter points at this or that carriage when a maid stops him.

“In this one,” Jungkook says seconds later, his arms full of a box he has gathered on the way. “In the space left at the center.”

Taehyung deposits the crate as indicated. When Jungkook props his own next to Taehyung’s, their shoulders bump in a faint brush. The motion propels a waft of freshness and earthy petricor. Jungkook smells like nature, as stupid as it sounds in Taehyung’s head. The floral yet rainy scent has another aspect to it that Taehyung can’t really pinpoint, one that is colder and grimmer.

Taehyung’s nose wrinkles.

Once done with his job, he swivels around to find another box to store.

As Jungkook had said, little remains, and less than five minutes later, the carts are filled with every single crate. Half of the servants lock the carts' doors shut, while the other half take care of looping the thick boat ropes around the large metal hoops attached on each carriage.

All the while, Taehyung can feel the abundance of glances his way.

The workers not aware of who their Prince is marrying are evidently curious, some staring too intensely at Taehyung before their gaze darts away when he glowers back at them.

"I'm surprised he's been helping," Jimin notes. "As in: carrying, not just directing. He seems a lot more approachable and friendly than any other human princes I've heard of."

Taehyung finished the knot around one of the hoops for the cart that will serve as a transportation vessel for Jungkook. "He can't be worse than his parents. Probably."

"I talked to him a bit and he's really nice."

"Sure," Taehyung chuckles without an ounce of amusement. "He's most likely faking it. I know you enjoy making new friends, be careful about him. There's something off."

"I'll be. Although I don't think he's faking anything."

"You don't know him."

"Neither do you and you'll never get familiar with your own *husband* if you constantly give him the cold shoulder."

"Good. I have absolutely no interest in befriending a human. Prince or not, husband or not," Taehyung declares with finality.

"You're a lost cause," Jimin forlornly sighs. "Hopefully you soon find a way to locate and take out that bundle of wood sticks shoved up your ass. Can't be comfortable walking around like that all day long."

Taehyung makes a move to kick Jimin's shin but the latter deftly dodges it to saunter off.

A rush of quietness wraps around the courtyard. It's sudden and abrupt enough to know its instigators

Seohyung and Sungmin make their entrance in the courtyard, their servants parting to let them pass through.

Taehyung meets his mother's gaze a moment later. At her nod, he walks to her, joining the rest of the group greeting each other. He stays close to hear the discussion, however far enough to stealthily eclipse if he wishes to.

"I see everything has been promptly taken care of," Seohyung comments with satisfaction.

Like clockwork, the veneer of indifference and coldness wraps around Jungkook. "Yes, my queen."

“Your people would like to bid their farewell to you, Jungkook,” Sungmin says. “You must do so at the citadel’s entrance. They await you.”

“Of course. I’ll be back shortly.”

On those last words, the Prince splits away from the group.

Thankfully not at the center of anyone’s attention, Taehyung decides to trail after him. He keeps a safe distance to, on one side, not be noticed by the Prince, and on the other to spy on him.

Jungkook emerges outside a minute later.

A commotion erupts at his appearance.

Taehyung leans against a column near the gates and attentively watches.

The Prince seems well in his element. He grins and chuckles. He shakes hands with the commoners, the foreign visitors and the merchants, wishing them a peaceful life or a fruitful business. He reassures his people: telling them that his departure is only temporary, and that he will continue to overview Amaris and make its residents a priority no matter what.

Taehyung can’t fully hear some of what is being said to the Prince, the ambient cacophony drowning the voices. He still catches a few people mention that perhaps trusting dragonborns may be too risky, that it may endanger Amaris. However, to Taehyung’s surprise — and suspicion —, Jungkook swiftly deflects the worries with a gentle diplomacy.

Jungkook goes as far as *defending* Vanae’s people, saying that dragonborns are kind and giving, where a lot is to learn from them.

The questions inevitably deviate toward the second participant of this marriage: Taehyung. They are more or less troubled, but most of the queries are curious about who their beloved Prince will marry. This time, unlike before, Jungkook answers with truths that only Taehyung knows to be half ones.

“I have a really good feeling about it,” the Prince replies to a woman.

“My betrothed is kind and cares about his people,” Jungkook says to a man. He’s about to respond to another when someone else exclaims.

“Wait! Isn’t that him?!” The man says, and as though it does not suffice, he points a crooked finger in Taehyung’s direction.

Taehyung curses.

His presence is noted by more people, including those on the stairs. He's about to bolt out when a hand snatches the fabric of his shirt to unceremoniously yank him into the masses. He has half a mind to snarl and utter a series of expletives to prompt the old man *let go of his fucking sleeve* , but before Taehyung can, the sea of men, women, children and more swarms him.

The dread is instantaneous.

It’s frenzied and consuming, gnawing at his core. It slams into Taehyung who can only freeze on his spot and stare at the humans surrounding him in every spot his eyes lay on. Shoulders bump

into him. Hands pat his arms or back. Fingers pull on his shirt. He's watched.

He's being appraised.

Again.

The shouts are next.

They're deafening, ringing between Taehyung's eardrums. In spite of their enthusiasm that he can perceive at first, they soon veer into vociferation, jeer or mockery. Numbers. *Or do they really?* His mind reels back and forth, from past to present, from restraint to freedom, both blending into a veil of suffocating fear that coils around Taehyung's throat.

Cold sweat blooms on his nape and he can feel it happening, the hazy edges of one of those fright attacks he hasn't had in hell knows how long. His skin prickles on the tip of his fingers, a telltale sign of them about to go numb. He tries to focus on something else. *Anything.* But all he can hear are the stifling sounds of voices mingling together.

"He's so handsome!"

"Look at him. Fucking pathetic."

"Man..." A laugh. "Are those sweat drops or tears?"

"You two are splendid together!"

"Is he waking up?"

"Fuck. I think he's waking up. Get—"

"Aah, you make such a beautiful pair."

"Hurry it up. Don't let him get away."

"Please, take care of our Prince."

"I'll take care of this one. You finish this part. Quick."

“Please do! Make sure that the Prince is well treated! He deserves the best only!”

“Thank you,” someone says with levity, unbeknownst to the way Taehyung’s heart is a throb away from spilling out of his chest. “I assure you he will.”

A whiff of rich floral scent is blown in Taehyung’s direction along with the voice. It’s coupled with an alien hand that grabs a hold of his right arm, tugging him closer to a body that Taehyung believes to vaguely recognize as Jungkook’s.

Taehyung is lightheaded. His breathing gains in speed, trembling as he exhales through his mouth. The feeling of suffocation heightens to a point where he wants to turn into his dragon counterpart to simply be able to gulp more air, Amaris’ people be damned if they’re crushed in the process.

“My apologies for our abrupt departure, however we must carry on with the carts’ organization,” Jungkook says and unknowingly saves dozens of his people. “Thank you for seeing me goodbye, being so kind to me and welcoming to my betrothed. May you be well and healthy.”

Taehyung's legs that had locked without his control refuse to move. It’s only when Jungkook jerks on Taehyung’s arm a tad more strongly that Taehyung finally walks away with him.

Taehyung’s mouth clamps shut. His fists ball up, a desperate attempt to calm himself and crush down the ever growing dizziness that swells within his chest. It’s mechanical when he falls into steps next to Jungkook, the latter still gripping onto him.

“Close the gates, please,” Jungkook orders to someone as he and Taehyung enter the citadel.

The doors are pushed shut.

Taehyung immediately relaxes — even if slightly. The yells and affluence of smells that had suffused his nose are muffled. He doesn’t know when they reach the back of the citadel, but he hears some voices that he remembers.

The hand on his arm vanishes.

His mind backtracks to the nightmare of a few years ago. The pain flares anew, even if Taehyung knows that he isn’t back there again, but—

Two palms cups Taehyung’s face.

Someone — Jimin — says “Hey. You’re with us.”

Taehyung peers down at Jimin. The tremors in his body come in waves that he does his best to tame down. He centers himself on Jimin and his touch, on his parents’ familiar scents as they rush toward him with concerned looks.

He’s safe, he repeats to himself in a mantra.

He’s with his family and safe, away from most humans.

Safe.

The agonizing pain isn’t here. It’s only in his head, a phantom ache of the ghosts that haunt his nights since six years ago.

Taehyung breathes in and out, counting in his head during each exhalation and inhalation. As the numbers elapse, he taps the pulp of each finger on his thumb, counting over and over again.

Jimin pats Taehyung's cheeks and, most likely sensing that Taehyung's alarm has quelled down, he drops his hands. "What the hell happened?" His tone is harsh, aimed at Jungkook.

"I don't know..."

Taehyung exhales a deep sigh. He lifts a shaky hand to cover his mouth with it, his brows furrowing as he rubs the heel of his palms against his eyelids. The veil blurring past and present is eventually gone, and so is the intangible hand strangling his breath away.

"He was at the front with me, I hadn't seen him behind me. He was tugged in the crowd by some people and—" Jungkook pauses, and Taehyung can feel the glance aimed his way. "He seemed unwell, so I brought him back here."

"I thought— Okay. Okay…" The warning sting in Jimin's timber disappears. "Sorry. Didn't mean to speak to you like that."

"It's fine." It doesn't seem like it, however, both in the way the Prince says this and in the aloofness that envelops him anew.

"Taehyung, my son, are you alright?" Dahee worries and squeezes his arm.

"Yeah, m'fine," Taehyung rasps. His skin crawls with the itch to leave. The maids keep ogling his way. The humiliation washes over him, untamed and acute.

Dahee must feel his discomfort because she speaks. "Perhaps we should leave, then, if all has been readied for the flight."

"Yes," Jungkook agrees. "I just need to—"

"Jungkook!"

Someone bumps Taehyung's shoulder who recoils at the touch. It's a man, he realizes, one that encases the Prince in a hug.

"I thought you left already," the man says.

"I wouldn't have without telling you goodbye," Jungkook answers, his sadness evident.

The man is at least a head taller than Jungkook. He's sturdy with broad shoulders and an overall strong build. He has black hair that is shaved short and when the man separates from Jungkook, Taehyung can tell that the human is older than the Prince.

The man turns to survey the group, Taehyung only noticing then the absence of the Queen and King.

"This is Kim Namjoon," Jungkook presents, the others greeting the newcomer. "A dear friend of mine and my page."

"Are you moving out with Jungkook?" Dahee wonders.

“Not quite yet. I still have a few matters to attend to,” Namjoon replies with dimples carved in his cheeks.

“But it should happen eventually. We will be searching houses for him in Vanae once the time comes. Another friend will hopefully join me as well.”

“I’ll definitely visit you no matter what. And Yoongi too, although he’s been busy lately,” Namjoon ponders. His gaze catches Taehyung’s. “Are you Kim Taehyung? Jungkook’s betrothed?”

“Yeah.” Taehyung clears his throat to chase away the roughness in it. He shakes hands with the man.

“Nice to meet you.” Namjoon lets go. Taehyung shoves his hands in his pants’ pockets to nullify any further hand shaking. “I’ve heard a bit about you. Only good things.”

“You have?” Taehyung asks with unmasked doubt.

“Yes,” Namjoon laughs.

Oddly enough, Jungkook’s ears and neck redden.

“Jungkook has been raving about how h—”

“Impatient I am!” Jungkook slaps his friend’s back and there’s a wavering, forced smile on his lips. *Fucking viper.* “I’m sure you have a lot to do, Joon.”

“Right, right. Bye Jungkook,” Namjoon chuckles and hugs the Prince again. “I’ll miss you. Come visit us soon if we can’t.”

“I will.” There’s a shine in Jungkook’s eyes, and Taehyung averts his own. “Go now or I never will."

“Please, take care of him,” Namjoon smiles. “You will see that he can be quite a handful once he’s comfortable and out of his shell, so beware of—”

“Good. *Bye*. Kim Namjoon,” Jungkook hisses like a damn cat, his timber icy, and he pushes on his friend’s shoulders to thrust him forward. Jungkook waits for Namjoon to be away to huff and turn around. His ears are still red, the pink hues echoing those on the apple of his cheeks and nose. “Shall we go?”

The assigning affair of who carries which carts goes smoothly until they reach the point of deciding who the Prince will ride with.

Taehyung refuses to be the one to carry the Prince. What if he accidentally drops and kills the Prince? Plus he'd rather avoid being near a human for the rest of day. Or week. Or month, if Taehyung wishes to overcompensate for earlier's fright.

“Taehyung,” Dahee grunts. “We will pass over the city. Jungkook being flown away by one of us is a show of trust that will reassure Amaris’ people. And considering how the news of this marriage has spread like wildfire, they will enjoy seeing the betrothed everyone one has been speaking of as of late.”

“If not, I can be transported by someone else, it’s alright,” Jungkook offers.

There it is again: the forced compliance that irritates Taehyung. “I’ll fly you,” he ultimately says and walks to a spacious spot allowing him to shift without destroying anything. Relief flows through Taehyung’s limbs as he adorns his dragon self, his wings stretching and flapping a couple times.

Jungkook enters his carriage, and Junhyun fastens the door's lock behind the Prince. The carriage has two opened windows carved on each side, one of which Jungkook peeks out of to speak with Taehyung’s father.

“Your parents won’t see you off?”

“They’re probably busy. We can leave.” Jungkook peers up at Taehyung, his gaze dragging across the sheer height and size of Taehyung’s dragon form that would have most humans cower, however not the Prince, it seems. There’s a palpable awe on the Prince’s face, eyes bright and his mouth parted. “Wow...” the Prince breathes out. “You’re beautiful.”

Taehyung scowls. Surely, Jungkook had seen Taehyung and his parents in their dragon selves during their first meeting, so why the amazement now?

“First time seeing a dragon?” Jimin says.

“Yes,” Jungkook smiles. “I was quite nervous and lost in my own head during the dinner with Taehyung and his parents. I hadn’t seen them this way at all in the night's darkness.”

Ah.

“Jiminie! Come help us,” Junhyun exclaims from afar.

“Enjoy the flight, Jungkook," Jimin shouts then scurries away.

“Could we make sure to fly above the citadel and where my people are?”

There’s a fabricated softness to the Prince’s voice. Taehyung doesn’t know if he is *that* good at seeing through the Prince’s mask of compliance, or if the Prince is *that* bad at hiding it around Taehyung. It's perhaps a bit of both, but it does not matter. It irks Taehyung regardless.

“If possible, please?”

Taehyung ignores the Prince in favor of scanning the courtyard.

Junhyun has shifted as well, the dragon so colossal that it leaves no space for Dahee and Jimin to do the same on ground. The maids, once passed the stage of gawking in pure shock, begin to skittishly bustle around Junhyun. Half of the carts and the heaviest one are delegated to Junhyun, while the rest are split between Dahee and Jimin.

Taehyung had wanted to carry more than only Jungkook, however everyone had protested, deeming it too unsafe for him to have more than one. As a result, Taehyung is solely tasked with the transit of the Prince.

A dozen minutes later, Jimin and Dahee are both high up in the sky alongside Junhyun. Some servants make a move to attach the rope on Taehyung’s talon, but he growls at them in warning. They promptly scamper away.

With the gnarled fingers of his right talon, Taehyung grips onto the ropes, curling them around a couple times. Once satisfied with his grip, his wings sweep up and down as he pushes himself higher.

His parents and Jimin are already on their way to Vanae, whereas Taehyung, in a fleeting show of kindness, drifts to the front of the citadel. Being an adept flier makes it easy to make sure the carriage does not awkwardly sway nor accidentally decapitate anyone, even as he skids low above the crowd.

Amaris' residents are quiet, their eyes riveted upward on Taehyung. Jungkook's torso peeks out of the window to wave.

Once the amazement has passed, the people rip through the quietude in a burst of cheers.

"Good luck!"

"We will miss you, Prince Jungkook!"

"We will be waiting for the wedding!"

"Be careful, my prince!"

Still befuddled by how loved Jungkook appears to be in spite of how unpleasant the Queen and King are, Taehyung draws some more circles over the public place. He then flies down the avenue for good measure, hastening when this intangible hand forms anew around his throat.

Done with entertaining the humans, and growing increasingly overwhelmed by the sight of the city, Taehyung continues his path to the east, away from the people.

Soon, they leave Amaris, hopefully for good.

The hours elapse one by one.

The thunder of dragons prefers to not take any break so as to not struggle with the carts and carriages amidst the dense forest. Junhyun's pace has abated by now; he, Dahee and Jimin out of sight behind Taehyung who's travelling ahead of them.

The joy of flying, feeling the wind brush against his scales and skin, drives him away from his worries or discomfort. His wings ache, becoming sore from the long and uninterrupted flight, but Taehyung has grown used to it. He discards the dull pain to instead focus on the gorgeous night sky and speckles of stars, the calm burden dangling between his contorted fingers partially forgotten.

So Taehyung is distracted. His awareness is fleeting and elsewhere. He does not pay attention to his surroundings.

Nor to the ball of fire aimed at the bundled ropes holding the Prince's carriage.

It takes a few seconds for him to process the lack of weight in his forelimb, for his instincts to blink awake and whisper at him that something is terribly, *terribly* wrong.

However when he does and looks down, it's to the sight of the plummeting carriage.

Jungkook is still propped on the window of his free falling transport. His eyes are wide and peering up at Taehyung, so evidently confused and unable to grasp why gravity is pulling him to the ground. The ruby in Jungkook's necklace gleams with a navy hue.

Taehyung remains afloat.

His wings whisk once, twice, and it's at the third that he snaps out of his stupor.

Taehyung dives down.

He gathers all of his strength to rapidly twist the angle of his body so that he chases the carriage in a plunge through the air. The wind billows against him, grazing across his wings that he beats to give himself more momentum. He then flattens them to his flanks, reducing the drag on his scales while simultaneously increasing his speed.

The pulsations of his heart slow down. His focus zeroes-in on the carriage where Jungkook has disappeared. He extends a talon toward the cart and swings to grab it.

He misses, the distance still too great.

He emits an aborted gnarl, an echo of the curse that erupts in his head.

He tries again.

This time, he feels the wood between his fingers, his claws seizing the carriage and piercing onto the sides.

However the ground is too close now. His speed is too much. He barely has the time to break through the carriage into splinters of wood to safely hold Jungkook in his palm before he crashes down into a resounding boom. He rolls and slides across the ground in a tumble. The trees give under his weight, the trunks shattering like twigs as he presses his right forelimb flushed on his chest.

He twists on his front and the claws of his free fore and back talons bore into the ground. They dislodge pieces of grass and rocks, sending them flying on the wake he rakes. He slowly curbs down to a halt.

Taehyung's heart is wildly trashing in his chest now, its palpitations erratic and pulsing in his veins. Blood hollers in his ears, an echo of the warning roar threatening to break free from his mouth.

This was a trap, he thinks.

The marriage, the alliance.

This was all a trap, and Taehyung has fallen for it once more.

The first thing that his brain registers is pain: imploding everywhere in his body, rendering it impossible to pin an exact point. Then it's the alarm bells ringing between his ears. Before they

swallow him whole, he stretches his wings, jerking them this and that way.

There’s no throe in them.

No broken or partially fractured bone. Nothing aside from bruises that will inevitably bloom from the impact. They're fine. *He's fine.*

Air leaves Taehyung’s lungs when the anguish lessens.

He feels something move in the tight grip of his talon. He unfolds it, uncurling his claws and fingers.

Jungkook lies at the center of Taehyung’s palm in a mess of broken wood. A grimace etches his face before his gaze locks with Taehyung’s, yards above him. The Prince’s eyes still hold this agitated disorientation in them, and Taehyung is certain that his own expression mirrors it.

Was this really a trap? But why would they risk the Prince's life?

Taehyung surveys their surroundings as he ponders on whether or not to crush the Prince in his talon.

He can see the pieces of the now destroyed carriage scattered around, with what's left of the ropes burnt on each end. The ground in front of him is a flattened mess of trees and upturned soil that stretches over 200 yards.

A growl crawls at the back of Taehyung’s throat. The rumble is low, echoed through the intact parts of the forest.

A strangled noise commands his attention. He casts his gaze down on Jungkook who, for the first time since Taehyung has met him, seems out of depth. *Scared,* even. And Taehyung would find pleasure in terrifying a human if his mind hadn't been preoccupied by attack. His nerves prickle to life as the trail of spikes on his spine shivers in anticipation.

All of a sudden, the alarm on Jungkook’s face is replaced by a frigid scowl. He sits up and twists to peer behind him.

Taehyung looks forward.

There’s a group of four dragons flying closer to the ground, and Taehyung's turmoil grows.

Jungkook aptly jumps down the feet separating Taehyung’s forelimb from the ground while Taehyung rises on his talons. His tail snaps on one side, stilling there a moment before whipping on the opposite side as he watches the dragonborns.

When he does not recognize the first two that land, Taehyung tucks his wings against his flanks, his tail immobile. He shuffles on his spot to stand over Jungkook, framing the Prince with his fore talons that find an anchor into the soil. Taehyung hunkers down and he lowers his stance and head with a continuous snarl, his upper lip curving upward. He can feel the growl boom within him, about to be intercepted by a staccato, but he waits.

Just a little longer.

A hiss commands Taehyung's gaze that falls on Jungkook.

It takes a few seconds for Taehyung to realize where the sound comes from, the creature — *snake* — barely visible in the darkness of the night sky and faint moon rays. The serpent coils around Jungkook's shoulders and right arm, its length and width rivaling that of a boa. Its head turns and lifts, as though to peer at Taehyung, but the eyes are closed.

Then, it vanishes as swiftly as it appeared.

Chapter End Notes

I may be nursing an obsession with giving pets to my characters, sorry not sorry, hope you liked this chapter 🤍

❧ Twitter

Chapter 3: A Supper's Omens

Chapter Summary

> Taehyung, Jungkook and the rest of the family arrive at Vanae. Ensues an unexpected encounter with an annoying idiot, *another dinner and a revelation that Taehyung is only partially surprised by.*

Chapter Notes

> I think this chapter was my favorite one to write so far for some reasons, especially taekook's arguing at the dinner table, I've never written any enemies (kinda) to friends to lovers before so playing around with taekook bickering and antagonizing each other is surprisingly fun XD
>
> ❧ Twitter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The two last dragons land, and with them, Taehyung falls quiet.

He finally recognizes who they are, more specifically the ice dragon that shifts to human and walks forward with a misplaced assurance. The other three follow suit, chuckling as they converse among each other.

“Hey, Taehyung! Enjoyed our trick?” One of them shouts.

“We thought we’d give you and your betrothed a warm welcome,” Woobin adds. “I hope we didn’t spook you too badly. You seemed quite distraught.”

Woobin, Minho and the other two pause a couple feet away from the Prince.

Taehyung prowls, the ire quivering and kept alive by the prideful grin on Woobin’s face. He looms further over Jungkook, so much so that his chest brushes against the Prince's crown.

“A pleasure to meet you, my Prince. Welcome to Vanae.” A sharp grin displays Woobin's teeth. He bows, the motion anything but respectful. “We thought we’d give you our rite of passage, a fairly common practice for our kind." He straightens up, a hand tucked in his trousers’ pockets while the other settles on Jungkook’s shoulder that he pats. “Your first true flight, so to speak.”

Jungkook looks unimpressed, to Taehyung’s delight. There’s a moue of boredom on the Prince’s face that isn’t entirely erased by the curve of his lips. “What a terrific flight," he deadpans. "I've enjoyed it thoroughly, however. More particularly the unexpected skydiving toward the end. Thank you…”

Woobin's composure falters before it strengthens anew. “Choi Woobin.”

“Thank you, Choi Woobin. I’ll make sure to remember your name in case I need some additional diving lessons."

While Taehyung is learning that the Prince thrives in playing pretense, Taehyung does not share a figment of the patience Jungkook is showing. He shifts to human, landing on Jungkook’s left. Then he unceremoniously snatches Woobin by the collar of his shirt to shove him away from the Prince and slam the dragonborn against a tree.

“What the *fuck* were you thinking?”

Woobin’s friends bring forth their lightning or fire.

Taehyung tightens his grip, his glare riveted on the idiotic fool. He goes through his imaginary roulette in response. He doesn’t grant Woobin’s friends a look when he flicks a hand in their direction. The three men are shoved away and stumble on their back. He extends his arm toward them, and the muscles in his fingers tremble, straining under the pressure of his breath of force to keep the three dragonborns down.

“Relax.” Woobin's hands shoot up. “We wouldn’t have let the Prince splatter to death. We saw you go for him before us and figured we’d let you do the job."

A crack erupts.

Taehyung isn’t certain if it’s from a rock or one of Minho’s bones breaking under the weight of Taehyung’s arcane. He should let go of the three dragonborns, because with the force that he exerts on them, something as simple as breathing can become nigh impossible, but he does not care enough to do so quite yet.

“I’ll lay it on slowly and simply so that even you can understand it,” Taehyung starts. His fingers curl tauter and with them bring another snap of *something* . “I know you like to play and harass because this is all you’re good for, aside from being your father’s whiny little lackey.”

“Don’t fucking—”

The tree trunk winces and crackles in protest when Taehyung presses Woobin harder against it. “Do not *ever* do anything like that again or I swear to the Elders I’ll tear your head apart from your body as I’ve been wanting to for years. Do you understand?”

Anger flashes in Woobin’s eyes, betrayed by the flakes of ice creeping up his neck. “Yeah, I won’t."

“This goes for your friends too.” Taehyung releases the three men on the ground who gasp and cough as they sit up. “Don’t talk to the human prince or play any of your fucking games with him. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Woobin grunts.

Taehyung lets go of Woobin. He watches him go to his friends to help them up, and Taehyung can’t tame the satisfaction that blooms in him at the way Minho clutches his left arm against his chest.

“Bye Jungkook,” Woobin says with a smile, turning around to walk backward. “I hope we’ll get to know each other. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Taehyung’s hand twitches. “ *Leave.* ”

Woobin and his friends shift to their dragon selves, and the group flies off with barked roars.

There’s a turmoil of emotions that storms within Taehyung.

First is the blazing anger, born from Woobin’s trick and the consequences that could have been disastrous. Then it’s the lingering upset of the risks Taehyung had to take, of how he could have possibly ruptured a bone in his wings in his effort to rescue the Prince.

The concern coalesces next.

Uncanny because it’s directed at his own well-being, but also Jungkook’s?

Taehyung shakes his head. He can't evince any sort of empathy for humans anymore. He's just tired and in pain.

One of his hands shoots to his shoulder to massage away the soreness in it.

Fingers graze his arm.

He recoils from them and his head darts to glare at the Prince.

“Are you hurt?” Jungkook says.

Worries?

“You’re the one who fell,” Taehyung retorts, perhaps more harshly than the question warrants.

“I’m fine. You caught me in time. But your shoulder—”

“Is peachy.” Taehyung drops his hand from his arm.

“Who were they?”

“You don’t want to know.” Taehyung sees the way Jungkook’s mouth opens to surely utter a retort but promptly closes. Taehyung sighs. “The cowardly one I slammed against the tree is Woobin. He’s one of Seungwon’s sons." He figures that if someone should know, it’s the man that had once been the pig's betrothed.

“That explains a lot," Jungkook huffs. "I’ve never met him or any of Seungwon's sons during my visits.”

“Clearly for the best.”

“What about the one whose arm you broke?”

“Minho. An idiot and Woobin’s best friend."

“How did you do it?” There’s a certain curiosity in Jungkook's eyes, laced with this absence of dread again. “He was feet away from you. The other two as well, yet you… You held them down with your hand. From afar”

“*Arcane*,” Taehyung whispers with a wave of his fingers and a snarky half smile.

Jungkook's lips purse around a half frustrated pout. “Yes. But what kind of arcane, exactly, is what I’m wondering."

“Woobin is just as bad as his father," Taehyung disregards. "Better to stay away from him, but then again, you do whatever you want to do as long as you don't cause *me* troubles.”

“I see.” The Prince must understand that Taehyung won’t expand any further because he says “How do we continue our journey?”

“I turn. You sit in my palm. That’s how."

“That doesn’t sound very safe...”

“Tough shit. However, before that.” Taehyung reduces the distance between them. “How about you explain to me why you had a damn snake on your shoulders that wasn't there before?”

Jungkook's hand flies to his necklace. A sheepish smile paints his lips as he emits an awkward chuckle. "About that, I forgot to mention I brought a friend with me that I *will* tell you more about, but later when it will be the two of us. She's a bit angsty right now with everything that has happened, so it's wiser to wait for her to cool off."

"What kind of damn friend is that?"

"An important one."

Taehyung scrutinizes the necklace Jungkook is clutching onto. The jewelry appears mundane. The chain is golden and quite thin, the centerpiece consisting of an equally thin golden armature coiled around a pear shaped ruby. He can tell the precious gem is of high quality, perfectly polished and cut, however when it catches a ray of the moon, the same navy hue echoing the one of the snake's scales shines in the edges of the ruby.

“Should we—” Jungkook pauses. When the Prince never finishes his sentence, Taehyung glances back at him. Jungkook rummages through the purse slung across his chest. “No.” He twirls left and right and he drops down on his knees to frantically drag his fingers through the soil.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“My handbook. It’s gone. It was in the pouch but it's not there anymore.”

Taehyung has half a mind to discard the issue, but in a feat of altruism that will hopefully be rewarded by draconic deities with endless fortune and prosperity, he opts to help the Prince.

He lightly taps Jungkook's knee with his shoe. “Get up."

“Have you found it?” Jungkook rises on his feet, expectant.

“Let me smell you.”

Jungkook blinks fast. He stares at Taehyung. His head tilts to the side, kind of like a hatchling, and if the Prince were a dragonborn, Taehyung can tell the ears and tail would twitch in confusion.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Dragonborns tend to have acute senses. I’m one of them."

“Oh.”

“I smell you, then I can track the book,” Taehyung continues, providing more obvious explanations that aren’t needed *at all.* “It’ll probably still have some remnants of your scent on it."

“It will. I always have it on me.” Jungkook's hands fold in front of him, fingers fiddling together. “How, huh... How do you want to smell me?”

Taehyung would like to, quite frankly, dissipate into thin air if possible.

Or perhaps fusing with the soil would be a better option. His body would then become one with the ground and could even be used as a rich fertilizer.

“Your wrist,” Taehyung ultimately chooses to say.

“Oh.” Jungkook lifts a hand between he and Taehyung, the motion elegant, as if awaiting to be greeted by a kiss on the knuckles. “I thought you’d smell my neck instead."

Taehyung's nose wrinkle in disgust. “No.” He seizes the Prince’s wrist a tad rougher than calculated and turns it.

“Why not? Wouldn’t my scent be more potent there?”

“Scenting the neck is for family members or mates. You’re none of that.”

Taehyung has evidently struck a sensitive chord in Jungkook. A flicker of hurt sneaks through the mask the Prince wears, hidden seconds later by apathy.

Taehyung shrugs it off. He brings Jungkook's inner wrist higher. The burnt floral scent imbues Taehyung’s nostrils but there’s a bitterness to it this time, sharp and acrid. This is enough for him to catalog the scent. He drops Jungkook’s arm and scans the field, smelling the air.

“You’re like a bloodhound.”

Taehyung, unsure on whether or not he has properly heard the remark, slowly pivots. “Did you just compare me to a dog, you damn viper?”

“Not purposefully.”

Taehyung considers *purposefully* forming a ball of mud to throw it on the Prince’s face or expensive attire, but the latter is already soiled from the fall and search of the book.

Taehyung scouts the area and finds the tome after a few minutes of exploration. He digs into the soil, seeing it buried there. He glances above his shoulder. The Prince is occupied with his own searches. Using this moment of inattention, Taehyung discreetly sifts through the handbook.

It's blank, no traces of ink or erased writings discernible in any of the pages.

“Is that it?”

Taehyung does *not* startle, but he does tense on his spot. He stands and shows his discovery to the Prince.

“Oh my God.” Jungkook snatches the book. He inspects it, taking note of the roughened spine and of the otherwise pristine condition. He exhales a long, heavy sigh.

“One hell of a reaction for an empty book."

“It’s important to me.”

That Taehyung has fathomed. It's exactly what feeds the nagging voice at the back of his head, and he tucks the information in this box he has opened in his mind about everything that he finds odd regarding Amaris’ Prince.

Taehyung wordlessly shifts to his dragon self and plops his right forelimb on the ground, palm up. Jungkook slides the necklace underneath his dress shirt then he stills, his gaze darting between Taehyung’s muzzle and the elongated, acute claws of the talon.

It takes an impatient gesture of Taehyung’s head toward his talon for Jungkook to climb on the palm. The Prince sits crossed legs, making himself comfortable there, but the stiffness in his shoulders betrays his apprehension. When Taehyung takes off, Jungkook scrambles to wrap an arm around the gnarled and scaly thumb.

Not that Taehyung would let the Prince fall to his death again.

Maybe.

Taehyung’s house finally — *finally* — appears in the distance.

He lands in the garden, and after letting Jungkook descend from his palm, he helps Jimin settle down with the carriages and carts.

“Now, what happened to you both?” Jimin wonders.

“Woobin."

“What?”

“He apparently wanted to give the Prince a ‘warm welcome’. He burnt the carriage’s ropes. It fell. I caught the Prince just in time and dealt with the other asshat."

“This annoying bastard. Are you alright, Jungkook?" Jimin worries. "That must have been terrifying.”

“I’m fine,” Jungkook replies with a small smile. “Taehyung thankfully got me before anything irreparable could happen to me.”

“Thank the Elders,” Jimin sighs. “This little shit will hear from me when—”

“Where are Mom and Dad?” Taehyung interrupts.

“They should be there in twenty or so."

Taehyung nods and slumps down on the grass. He surveys Jungkook who's examining what he can see of the forest. The Prince shuffles on his heels to canvas the garden and the house. He seems unexpectedly at ease for someone so far away from home, thrust into the foreign land of dragonborns.

“It’s beautiful,” Jungkook utters with a voice mellowed by an evident tiredness.

“There’s a bunch of pretty spots in Vanae,” Jimin grins, walking up to the Prince. “I’ll have to show some of them to you.”

“That would be lovely. The house is gorgeous too, very open. It's a nice change.”

“This one is Dahee and Junnie’s house. Yours and Taehyung’s is far down over there,” Jimin points out. “Although your own home was even more spacious than this one.”

“The garden makes for a nice façade for how confined the life at Amaris’ citadel is."

Taehyung is stunned by the honesty.

Whatever strict upbringing the Prince may have undergone, being away from his parents has a nearly arcanic effect on his mood. The mask is still present, however less intense, the edges of it rounded by a palpable happiness.

“Good thing you left that hell hole, then,” Jimin surmises and Jungkook chuckles in agreement.

Taehyung lays on his back, a yawn torn out of him as he stretches his arms over his head. His lids fall shut. He hears some rustling when Jimin loiters next to him. Taehyung cracks an eye open.

Jungkook has also found a seat on the ground but unlike Taehyung, the Prince is gracefully settled, his legs folded under him to use his feet as a cushion.

The three of them wait for Taehyung’s parents.

Jimin and Jungkook discuss together about matters Taehyung doesn’t bother listening to or participating in.

Taehyung must have dozed off at one point because he’s woken up by a kick on the leg.

“Rise and shine,” Jimin announces. “The parents are back. We need to help them with the carts.”

Taehyung groans but he stands — even if wobbly and lazily — and he trails after Jimin, the two turning to their dragon forms.

It takes some time to safely deposit the carts in front of the family house, but it’s completed half an hour later, the group exhausted, especially Junhyun who looks one step away from falling asleep right then and there.

“Are you faring well, Jungkook? Not too anxious about being here?” Dahee wonders with a gentle pat on Jungkook’s back.

“I’m alright. I believe it’ll be interesting."

“There it is again.” Taehyung doesn’t want to actively antagonize the Prince, but he also can’t repress the comment.

Jungkook peeps at Taehyung. “Pardon?”

“The half truths half lies,” Taehyung says. Dahee sends a glare his way while she walks toward the house with Junhyun and Jimin.

“I’m not lying."

“But you’re not being honest." Taehyung punctuates this with a glance at the Prince's necklace.

“And you—” Jungkook swallows, probably both his saliva and what retorts that is about to escape his mouth. “Nothing. Apologies. I’ll try to be more candid with you.”

“If you can, that is.”

“I can do anything my betrothed wants."

Taehyung doesn’t entertain the answer with one of his own, lest he snaps and starts an argument — more than he already has.

“We will leave everything out here for the night and take care of it tomorrow morning,” Dahee declares when the Prince and Taehyung enter the house. “And no shoes in the house, boys. That goes for you as well, Jungkook."

“We have more than enough rooms to accommodate everyone,” Junhyun nods

“There won’t be a risk of any of the carts being gone by the morning?” Jungkook asks.

Taehyung kicks his boots off his feet. “Dragonborns aren’t thieves like humans."

“You did steal my yogurt when we were twelve though,” Jimin, the horrible friend that he is, provides.

Everyone bursts into laughter, even Jungkook who joins in the hilarity that Taehyung would squash with a quip if he wasn’t too fatigued to remain standing, let alone formulate any tasteful jab. “I’m showering first."

“We have a second bathroom you can use, Jungkook, if…”

Taehyung is out of earshot when he strides up the stairs.

He arrives inside his bedroom, and he doesn’t mean to slam the door, but it does close louder than intended. He marches to his bed where he sags. His hands rub up and down his face, carding through his hair and his nails scratch at his scalp to secure himself in the present moment.

It hadn’t happened in a while, a fright attack.

Taehyung has been significantly better at dealing with these since that forsaken day a few years back. He can handle crowds of dragonborns without any difficulty now, but it evidently doesn’t

extend to humans yet. If ever, really.

The humiliation and shame arising from the fact that the maids but also his betrothed have seen him distressed, rooted in place like a fucking fool still runs hot in his veins. The Prince will ask questions, whether to Taehyung himself, his parents or Jimin. People always do. Both out of concern, fear, and a morbid interest of *'What could possibly terrify the brash Kim Taehyung?'*

Taehyung clicks his tongue.

At least he's safe, he reassures himself when his throat clogs up at some flashing memories. He's safe and home, away from the nightmare that had once torn his life asunder.

Laughter lulls from downstairs — Junhyun and Jimin's —, and he focuses on this. On him and his family being away from humans.

Most humans, he corrects when a foreign voice responds to Junhyun.

Once up on his feet, Taehyung rummages through his dresser to pluck a pair of loose, gray cotton pants along with a pair of underwear and a worn out black shirt. He makes a leisure job of his shower, thoroughly cleaning himself to get rid of all the human touches and smell that cling onto him.

His hair is damp when he exits the bathroom and collides with someone.

"Apologies." Jungkook steps back and bows.

He fucking *bows.*

Taehyung could care about making the Prince feel welcomed here, but that would imply putting aside his hatred for humans, and he can't muster that kind of acceptance.

"What are you doing up here?" Taehyung snips.

"I was on my way to the vacant bathroom." Jungkook is clad in a pajama too large for him, taken from Junhyun's wardrobe. This infuriating obedient demeanor envelops Jungkook, his shoulders withdrawn in coyness. "Should I not? If you want me to go downstairs, I will, my betrothed."

Something deep within Taehyung withers at the appellation. He can only stare at Jungkook in a mix of aversion — and embarrassment, to his horror.

The anger that he thought to be washed down the drain during his shower boils back to life. It's aimed at the Queen and King, for the vile way they may have raised and disciplined their son into being this docile doll. However it's also directed at Jungkook for putting up with it. Taehyung knows that he should evince some more pity at least, but he can't bring himself to. After all, the Prince is, or will be a revolting and cruel human like each of them is.

Like *him.*

"So what? If I order you to not step a foot upstairs, you won't?"

"Yes."

“Is that so?” Taehyung stalks near Jungkook. The Prince retreats until his back hits the wall, and Taehyung props his right palm next to Jungkook’s head, caging him there as their eyes lock together. “And what if I tell you to leave? To sit outside with only a water bowl in front of you, attached to a tree with a leash like a damn dog. Would you do it?”

Jungkook’s jaw is set tight, the muscles shifting under the skin. “Yes, my betrothed.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“But you are my betrothed.” Jungkook says with a lilt to his timber. His head lolls forward, a pretense at being demure, but it does not detract Taehyung from the calculating waters that oscillate underneath the mask. “Or rather fiancé.”

“I don’t care. You know my name. Use it.”

“Anything, Taehyung.”

“By the Elders.” Taehyung emits a callous chuckle, his fingers constricting on the wall. He fears they might leave indents in it. “Is this really how it’s gonna be from now on? *'Yes Taehyung’* , *‘Of course, Taehyung’* , *‘Anything for you, Taehyung.’* You’ll fucking fold in half at anything I say no matter how inane, egoistical or disgusting it may be?”

“May I—” Jungkook inhales then huffs a puff of air. His hands slide behind his back as he reclines against the wall. “May I speak my mind, please?”

“Yes. Don’t ask.”

“You’re the first man my parents try to wed me with that is decent looking, somewhat civil, and not twice my age or over,” Jungkook starts, and Taehyung taken aback both figuratively and literally as he steps away from the Prince. “I don’t want to endanger that luck by arguing with you after all the misfortune I’ve had so far with the previous suitors.”

“I’m more than decent looking," Taehyung childishly contests.

“You’re also more than a prick.” Jungkook seems surprised by his own outburst because his mouth remains open around a quiet *‘Oh’* before clamping shut.

“Yeah? And what would I be, exactly?”

Curiosity dances in Jungkook’s shifting eyes. He's quiet for a while, however a curl soon forms on his lips. “A bastard, for starters. Not literally, as far as I know, but one nonetheless,” he says with a firmness that gains in certainty the more he speaks. “You’d think the fire you have would warm this bitter heart of yours, but that’s too much effort on your part, isn’t it? You don’t like humans because you consider them revolting and cruel and is it not ironic how the very aspect you hate about us is the one you’ve been targeting me with?”

If Taehyung is completely honest with himself: he’s gobsmacked.

And also a little insulted.

He scoffs — because that’s all he can do, apparently — and he shoves his hands in his pajama pants’ pockets. “Who would’ve thought your friend was correct when he mentioned how much of a handful the prince of Amaris can be. A brat, if you will.”

“I’m not a brat,” Jungkook petulantly mutters. “I’ll still comply with what you ask of me.”

“Not if you don’t want to.”

“But—”

“But fucking nothing. You’re not a prisoner here and there isn’t any forced obedience I’m holding over your head no matter what your shitty parents may have said in contradiction. No one is keeping you hostage. *I* am not. You can run away at any moment and neither would I care or bat an eye at it, but I also wouldn’t be the one to tattletale on your ass.”

“Even if I wished to leave, I can’t run away from my responsibilities.”

“You can. My mom and dad would help you. Jimin would as well, knowing him.” The offer hangs in the air, assured on Taehyung’s side and tentative on Jungkook’s. “But if you don’t want to, then just be yourself, for hell’s sake. And stop being so damn… Bendy.”

“Bendy,” Jungkook echoes with a deadpan look.

“As bendy as this snake of yours that I'm still waiting for you to explain the existence of.”

The Prince’s eyes narrow. “What an odd term.”

“Not as odd as this pretentious, tacky necklace you’re wearing,” Taehyung shoots back. He revels in the displeasure that takes over Jungkook’s face.

“I’ll have you know that—”

“Don’t care. Leave me alone.”

Without a glance back, Taehyung walks down the hallway. He descends the stairs and soon finds his home on The Armchair. He commonly adores it, but right now, he muses about burning it to a crisp.

His favorite recliner reeks of a human.

“Don’t tell me you let the Prince sit in my chair.”

Jimin is pointedly looking away. Everyone is mute, even Taehyung’s parents occupying the kitchen. Junhyun whistles to himself.

“You know that it’s mine. It’s *my* ass that is imprinted and shaped on it."

“So territorial.” Jimin pinches Taehyung’s thigh with his toes. Taehyung smacks the nasty foot away.

“You know better than to be so self-centered,” Junhyun scolds, threatening him with the spatula he has in hand.

“Not with humans."

“Make yourself useful and help us cook instead of whining,” Dahee dismisses.

Taehyung tuts but obeys, joining his parents in the open kitchen and dining area.

The preparations are accompanied by an animated chit-chat, the roles being delegated to someone else whenever one of them has to vacate to shower.

Taehyung is currently involved in a debate with Jimin about the relatable flaws of a character in a book series they have been reading. As he more often than not is, Taehyung's distracted, meaning that he notices the presence of the Prince only when he swivels to the side and stumbles face to face with Jungkook.

“The hell are you doing here?” Taehyung reflexively sputters.

Jungkook arches a brow. “I moved here?”

“I know, get out of my way,” Taehyung says in one breath, feeling idiotic for having temporarily forgotten about The Invasion of his home.

“Have a seat, dear.” Dahee, installed at the end of the dining table, gestures for Jungkook to settle down. “Dinner is ready, and I don’t know about you, but I am famished.”

“It smells incredible,” Jungkook smiles and takes a place on Jimin’s left.

“It’s a family recipe,” Junhyun says, situated in front of Jimin. “We will share it with you one day.”

Taehyung thinks about springing up and booming a solemn *'I object'* , however before he can make a decision, the Prince precedes him.

“I’d be most grateful.”

Taehyung's nostrils flare when he exhales. He lays the large pot of noodles in the middle of the table, then the second one and he plops down on his father’s right. Just like the first fare he had shared with the Prince, Taehyung faces Jungkook in some sort of unsought candlelight date, a train of thought Taehyung forcibly stomps.

Taehyung’s attention is reduced to alleviating the grumbles of his empty stomach. He takes his task seriously, not bothering with any grace or measured pace as he wolfs down his meal. He soon ends up scraping the sauce from his plate and supplies himself with a second serving.

“Did you enjoy the flight with Taehyung?” Dahee asks after a while. “Aside from the debacle with Woobin.”

“It was…”

Amidst his chewing from where he’s hunched over his plate, cheeks bulging around a bite, Taehyung glances up at Jungkook.

The Prince’s gaze strays away from the table, before it falls on Dahee again. “It was freeing."

“Is it, isn’t it?” Dahee smiles.

“Being a dragonborn comes with a lot of this,” Junhyun nods then takes a sip of his water.

“Freedom?” Jungkook inquires.

“Yes. It is possibly what we cherish the most.”

“I can imagine,” Jungkook chuckles. “Being able to fly and go wherever you want, whenever you want and with whoever... It sounds like a precious dream.”

“Now you have us to fly you around,” Jimin grins.

Taehyung can only shake his head at his friend’s naïve amicability.

Jungkook bobs his head. He digs an elbow on the table to support his cheek on the back of his hand. He’s peering down at his empty plate, dragging around a tiny fleck of meat with his chopsticks.

“It goes without saying, Jungkook, however if you need or want anything, please do not hesitate to tell us no matter what it may be,” Dahee states. “You are no stranger here, nor is your company unwanted.”

“Someone would disagree with that,” Jungkook quips.

“Yup,” Taehyung says without missing a beat.

“Don’t pay attention to this moody child,” Dahee chides.

“And most importantly, give back to Taehyung as much as he gives to you,” Junhyun laughs.

“Perhaps," Jungkook agrees.

“With what you said to me earlier," Taehyung begins, "I have doubts believing you’ll give back anything. Are you even capable of—”

“And what do you expect from me, Taehyung?” The name is said with a venom that has Taehyung’s upper lip twitch around the hint of a snarl. “Since I was born, all I’ve known is to obey. Obey and never do, say or be what is not expected from the future king of Amaris.”

Taehyung isn’t the only one baffled by Jungkook’s admission, if the terse silence that befalls in the room is any given.

“You’re more than that veneer of compliance you adorn," Taehyung begins. “I saw it during that dinner in Amaris. I’ve seen it up there.” He nods toward the stairs. “It can’t be that hard to not be a damn doll when you’re well aware of how to be one.”

“It *is* difficult when I can lose everything I’ve worked for and more."

“And what is it that you have and could lose, hm? Status? Wealth? You clearly don’t have a family, so it can’t be that.”

“I have one. You’d know if you asked.”

“Oh you mean those two friends of yours? But what else, really?” Taehyung presses because he *has* to know what the Prince is hiding. “You could take them with you and escape the Queen and King’s clutches. I bet you’re smart enough to steal money from your parents and comfortably live off it.”

“You make it sound so *simple,”* Jungkook derides with a disdainful twist of his mouth, and the strands of hair brushing over his eyes do nothing to mitigate the iciness he pierces Taehyung with. “You know nothing.”

“I know something."

“Really, now?”

“You’re a coward.”

Jungkook stills. The knuckles of his fist turn white.

“You could change your life. Could run away with your friends, but that’s too much effort on your part, isn’t it, Viper? Because you’d have to make a crucial decision on your own for yourself, something you plainly aren’t used to. And it’s easier to wallow in your misery and feel sorry for yourself. It’s less trouble, less work. Less thinking.”

“The same can be said about you. You hide your cowardice behind a mindless rancor.”

“Perhaps,” Taehyung concedes. The Prince isn’t entirely wrong. “But one of the differences between dragonborns and humans is that when a human is scared, they hurt. They ally to slaughter what they’re afraid of and can’t comprehend. If there's a lesson I’ve learned from your kind, it’s that fear sows wrath, and wrath reaps destruction.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Sure,” Taehyung scoffs. “You—”

“You’re misunderstanding me."

“Enlighten me.”

“I’m not scared of you or dragonborns. I’m not scared of what anyone may do to me, or at least not as much as what you may believe.” There’s a shine in Jungkook’s eyes, the mist in them kindled by a fiery anger.

“What do you fear, then?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because I have an inkling that what you’re afraid of may turn against my family and I.”

“It may be hard to believe for you, but the world does not revolve around you."

“Then it wouldn’t be a problem to share it with us.”

“Taehyung,” Dahee steps in, the first one to break the escalating argument. “Stop.”

“Nah, I want to know. I’m not putting up with the whole compliance bullshit that is only there to hide whatever secret or scheme he’s preparing.”

“Jungkook has *just* arrived here,” Dahee sternly says. “Have some decen—”

“I’m scared of my parents.”

Eyes drift on Jungkook at his intervention.

“Damn. I never would have fucking guessed that one,” Taehyung answers with faux surprise. “Why are you scared of them?”

Jungkook fidgets on his seat. “They’re not—” He raises a hand to fiddle with his necklace, rolling the gem between his fingers. “My parents aren’t… good. It sounds foolish and frail, but it’s true.” His gaze roams across Taehyung and his family. “They act as though they have our people’s welfare in mind, but I know they don’t. They don’t seek to help or provide. They seek to use, plunder and control, in spite of the opulence they bask in already.”

Jimin's brows furrow. “What are you saying, Jungkook?”

“The first suitors I had been presented to were humans. However one day, the Queen and King became adamant about acquiring a spot at your draconic council and finding a dragonborn betrothed for me. I don’t know why, exactly, but—”

“I’ve told you he and his parents couldn’t be trusted.” Taehyung fights off the impulsive urge to do something he’d regret, like burning down Amaris’ citadel. “Every damn human is the same. Bunch of greedy pigs."

“Jungkook.” Dahee rests her glass next to her plate. She fixates the Prince with poise and cautiousness. “Do you believe your parents are pursuing the path of their ancestors?”

The loaded question floats in the room for a moment.

“Perhaps? I’m not sure,” Jungkook ultimately replies while picking apart his napkin. “I don’t hold my parents close to my heart at all, but I don’t know if they are inhuman enough to want to instigate a second Great War. Or worse.”

“You seem to nurture some doubts, however,” Junhyun says before Taehyung can. “What makes you think your parents may want to conquer more lands? Dragonborns’ lands, specifically.”

“She told you we have two warlocks, correct?” Three nods answer. “One of them is a friend of mine, Yoongi. I don’t know who the other one is. I never saw them and I've only heard of their visits in passing. But that second warlock is— They only have their best interest in mind. They’re like my parents, which is probably why they have been working together for years.”

“How would you know if you’ve never met this warlock,” Taehyung questions.

“I know,” Jungkook affirms. “You’ll have to trust me on that.”

Jungkook’s evasive reply doesn’t alleviate Taehyung’s suspicions regarding the *something* the Prince is concealing about himself and that has been bothering Taehyung since day one.

“Can we, Jungkook? Can we trust you?” Dahee asks, and isn’t that a one billion coin question.

“I’m obviously not supposed to tell you all I’ve shared, yet I have. As much as I loathe the Queen, she is right when she says that a token of trust must be given in order to receive one.”

“What are you actually supposed to do? Because your parents gave you a job aside from being Taehyung’s betrothed," Jimin deduces, "and I feel like it’s linked to why you think your parents may prepare a coup against dragonborns.”

Jungkook exhales.

There it is, right? The Prince will disclose what machination he’s sheltering, what truth lies below the surface.

“I’m supposed to look for something,” Jungkook starts, his voice barely above a whisper. “Investigate.”

Taehyung straightens up. “Something?”

Jungkook peers at him and nods. “An object that would reside in a dragonborns' land, according to my parents.”

“What, exactly?”

“Some sort of map, or information leading to said map that will then guide me to something no one knows the existence of, supposedly,” Jungkook explains. “Again, everything I say here is from the bits of knowledge my parents gave me, which unfortunately isn’t much. I'm not certain this map exists.”

“A map, you say?” Dahee ponders, her index tapping on her chin. “A map to where?”

“The primordial stone.”

Taehyung makes a noncommittal sound of confusion. “The fucking what?”

“The primordial stone,” Jungkook reiterates. “This is what my parents refer it to as. I don’t know more about it and have no idea about what it could do.”

“Have you ever heard of this stone, Darling?” Junhyun drapes a hand over Dahee’s fingers to meet her lost gaze.

Dahee shakes her head. "Never."

“They said this stone is ancient enough where even your…” Jungkook trails off. “I’m not certain what you call them, but where your oldest dragonborns wouldn’t be aware of this stone’s existence.”

“You mean the Elders?” Jimin exclaims. “Even *they* wouldn’t know?”

“Apparently. I don’t know what my parents’ end goal is, which is what annoys me the most. However this primordial stone must have some arcanic properties. What it will grant them is where the fog in their request confuses me.”

“But you’re fairly certain that it won’t be anything good."

As Taehyung had assumed with this charade of a marriage.

“I know they—” Jungkook’s lips pinch together. His face knits into a deep frown, his body withdrawing in itself. “I know they abhor dragonborns, and I don’t mean a mundane dislike one can have for a once rival kingdom. They hate your kind so, *so* greatly.” His eyes nervously dart on the four dragonborns. “It all stems from our family’s history, from how dragonborns are portrayed in it and our books.”

Dahee pensively hums. “You don’t share those views?”

“No. I never, *ever* have.” Jungkook declares and looks almost offended that Dahee would even utter this query. “I actually—”

Taehyung is dizzied by the whiplashes the Prince elicits in him. Jungkook's behavior jumps from assertive to hesitant while passing by indifferent. In the present moment, Jungkook’s expression is colored with reddening ears.

“I’ve always found dragonborns fascinating,” Jungkook confides, the words mumbled. “My parents never allowed me to buy books relating to your history or customs. They never let me speak to a dragonborn, aside from my potential suitors, but—” He deflates when his gaze bumps with Taehyung’s. “Anyway. It doesn’t matter. It's not important.”

“How come you don’t feel the way your parents do about us?"

“I was always a curious kid. I’d question everything I’d see, read or hear. With the upbringing I’ve had, I’ve never loved my parents, and I can’t trust what I can’t love.”

This might be the first time Taehyung agrees with the Prince on a matter.

“My friends are to be thanked as well,” Jungkook continues. “They’ve always provided me with an outside and unbiased view about dragonborns, especially Yoongi.”

“Yoongi is the warlock, is that correct?” Junhyun asks and Jungkook nods. “Can he be trusted?”

“With everything I have. Yoongi likes dragonborns, if it’s any reassurance to you. He’d bring me notes and sketches about them behind my parents’ back. I know he has worked with some of you as well, away from the Queen and King’s surveillance.”

“They said ‘detain’."

Jungkook's head lolls to the side. “Uh?”

“Your parents. They said they were detaining two warlocks,” Taehyung clarifies. “Why use this term? It’s been in my mind the whole time.”

“For the second warlock, I don’t know. But Yoongi… The Queen knows Yoongi loves me. She always used that to her advantage.”

“What a slimy bitch," Taehyung mutters to himself.

“Kim Taehyung,” Dahee chastises him.

Jungkook bursts into laughter, sending Taehyung through another whiplash when his mirthful gaze flits on Taehyung. “She certainly is, that I can agree with you.”

“Your friends aren’t safe at the citadel, if so,” Junhyun contemplates, driving the discussion back to its main subject.

“They aren’t. When I was living in Amaris, I could at least detract my parents from Namjoon and Yoongi, but I can’t anymore. I’m worried about my friends being left alone at the citadel.”

“We should bring them to Vanae. As soon as possible,” Dahee tells Junhyun who makes a sound of agreement.

“Namjoon’s departure from Amaris is already planned. It’s for Yoongi that it will be a tad more complex,” Jungkook frowns. “My parents are quite intent on maintaining any ownership they may have over something or someone."

“I see.” Dahee pushes herself up. She rounds the table and pauses next to Jungkook to crouch. Her lips are curled upward in a kind smile. “We will figure this out, Jungkook.” She cups Jungkook’s hands with her own. “About this primordial stone you spoke of, and about your friend. I promise you. Know that we deeply appreciate your token of trust.”

Jungkook responds with a wobbly smile. “Thank you.”

Taehyung is left to wonder if he’s the only one with a critically thinking brain.

It’s one of those rare times where reading his mother’s motives is impossible. He can’t tell if she’s truly gobbling up Jungkook’s story, but she’s at least experiencing some consideration for the Prince, which isn’t all surprising, but it still miffs Taehyung.

And so he professes his affront.

“None of you find it strange how easily Jungkook spilled out this so-called confidential knowledge about that primordial stone? No one? Why are you telling us all of this?” Taehyung addresses Jungkook. “You shouldn’t trust us with such sensitive information. I know I wouldn’t. Yet you are, and willingly so. Why?”

Jungkook retrieves his hands from Dahee’s clasp, one of them skidding to the necklace. “Because you asked Sohee’s name, among other observations I've made.”

“Huh?”

“I wish I had also asked for chocolate chips to combat the acidity of that night,” Jungkook quips. *Jokes?*

“Oh."

“You asked her name.” When Jungkook’s eyes lay on Taehyung, they’re softened with amusement. “You despise humans, yet you still treated Sohee as your equal, just like your parents had to anyone they’ve met at the citadel. It was easy to see that the respect you’ve shown for Sohee and the other helpers had been natural. Not forged.”

Dahee settles on her seat, watching Jungkook as Taehyung and everyone else is.

“It was unexpectedly comforting to see the very kind my parents had warned me about displaying hospitality for a race they would have every right to hate. As you’ve said it yourself," Jungkook continues, "I don’t have much to lose, but the very few I have, I will fiercely protect, and it starts

by hindering what plan my parents are orchestrating behind closed doors. It is time for Amaris to not be ruled anymore, but rather guided and cared for.”

The muteness that stretches after Jungkook’s tirade lasts for a while, those at the table meditating in silence.

What Jungkook has said makes sense, in the grand lines of it, but some parts of it still puzzle Taehyung. Like the necklace Jungkook’s hands keep skidding to. It’s small details that Taehyung’s thoughts can’t help but convene on.

"I must inform you that I won't hesitate to rip your body in half if you try anything against my family or myself," Taehyung warns.

"I expect nothing less," Jungkook answers, looking oddly relaxed.

“I hope you know how grateful we are for the trust you have awarded us with, Jungkook,” Junhyun says with a pointed side glance at Taehyung. “And I hope you will do the same with the one we will grant you.”

“Of course. Thank you for believing me. Or thinking of doing so. I just— I know my parents are preparing something and have been for a while. I’d like to stop them, because I fear it may be aimed at dragonborns once more, and I thought with this marriage, with your help, I can, now.”

“Considering that our kind may be at the very core of your parents’ lovely shenanigans,” Dahee says with an unfit levity, “I can assure you that we will do everything we can to aid you in this quest. We will discuss this and the primordial stone with our Elders, then we will see where it leads us.”

“It sounds wise."

“It will have to wait, however, since we have the wedding arrangements to take care of, as well as your integration at Vanae and amongst dragonborns. We should handle one matter at a time,” Junhyun says.

“We should, starting with sleeping,” Dahee mumbles through an inelegant yawn. “I’m exhausted.”

“So am I. It’s been a long time since our last trip.” Junhyun stands, mirrored by his mate. “Jungkook, if you would be kind enough to follow us upstairs, we will show your room for tonight.”

Jungkook springs up. “Oh of course, thank you.”

“You two." Dahee motions between Taehyung and Jimin. "The dishes."

The two friends agree without contesting.

Taehyung and Jimin rise in turn to collect the plates and cutlery that they pile in the right side of the double bowl sink.

They wait until Dahee, Junhyun and Jungkook are gone to speak.

“So.”

“I don’t trust him,” Taehyung swiftly says.

“I don’t either, but I’m willing to. I don’t see why he’d lie about what he said.”

“To gain our trust, stab us in the back and do whatever his parents truly demand of him.”

“I don’t think he was lying. With what he told us, he’s basically putting a bold, red target on his life, his friends' and his parents. It could backfire on him or provoke another war between dragonborns and humans. I doubt he’d risk that much so carelessly.”

“He keeps giving half truths,” Taehyung rebuts and grabs the loofah sponge to start cleaning the dishes.

“But that doesn’t mean he lied.”

“I find it concerning how blindly you, Mom and Dad are believing the Viper’s tales.”

Jimin shrugs. “Call it a gut feeling.”

Taehyung rolls his eyes at the ceiling. “By the Elders. Everyone’s following their gut feeling and it’ll end up with each one of you being disemboweled and then who will have to tidy up the mess and say *‘I told you so’* to your corpses? Me.”

“You’re being overly judgmental because he’s a human. If he was a dragonborn, you’d give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Yes. And?”

“And, just try to be nice to him, okay?” Jimin finds Taehyung’s gaze. “It must be hard on him to have been alienated all his life in his own home, and here too now.”

Taehyung pensively hums, pretending to mull over. “I’ll opt for something other than kindness.”

“Which is?”

“Blissful ignorance.”

Jimin smacks the back of Taehyung’s head. “You’re such a little shit.”

“Yup. Now rinse and dry those. They won’t do it themselves.”

Ready to brush his teeth and head to bed to, hopefully, wake up the next day and be struck by the realization that today has been nothing but a figment of his imagination, Taehyung swings the bathroom door open.

He does not yell when he falls face to face with Jungkook, but a strangled noise catches at the back of his throat and dies there.

Jungkook is staring at Taehyung like a deer in a headlight, poised on a wooden stool. His shirt is off, laying limply on his lap.

Taehyung should leave.

It'd be the decent thing to do — to close the door and *exit* — because even if he does not like Jungkook, he will always respect someone's privacy.

However Taehyung's gaze is riveted on a series of odd appearances: there are two pink and raw scratches on Jungkook's right forearm, starting from the elbow and down to the wrist, with another more circular on the bicep. Next are the purple-ish bruises blooming on Jungkook's ribs, waist and abdomen, a few of them somewhat round while others are elongated and strangely paralleled.

"What the fuck."

"Close the door!" Jungkook whisper-yells and shoots up.

Taehyung must have left his last remaining brain cell outside when he had walked down the corridor because instead of vacating the room like a sensible person would, he shuts the door behind his back, still very much inside the bathroom that *he should leave* .

Jungkook is gawking, his mouth open and brows furrowed. He glances down before looking up again.

Taehyung wonders if the Prince can see Taehyung's brain cell rolling in from under the door.

"I meant *outside* ?"

"Obviously." Eager to detract the Prince from Taehyung's miscalculation and swelling awkwardness, Taehyung says "What the hell happened to you."

"Does it matter?"

"Was this your parents?" Taehyung asks, ever the tactful man.

"No." Jungkook slumps down on the stool.

Taehyung examines Jungkook's chest a second time, the toned muscles on the pecs and navel disturbed by the bruises. "Then how did you get these?"

"It happened when you caught me. During the fall."

Well.

Taehyung *did* have a tight grip on Jungkook back then, strong enough to break the carriage, and it's these splinters that must have scraped Jungkook's skin. Taehyung hadn't thought of that up till now. He gnaws on his inner cheek. "You told me you were fine."

"Because I am."

"You visibly aren't."

“I thought you didn't care about me?” Jungkook turns on the faucet to wet a cotton pad. “And why are you still in the bathroom?”

“So the doll has some bite to him, huh?”

In a way that Taehyung can only describe as ‘sassy’, the Prince juts his chin up to peer up at Taehyung. “You told me to not pretend to be someone else as much,” Jungkook mutters, defiance swimming in his gaze. "And don't call me 'doll'. I don't like it."

“Whatever you say, Viper.”

Taehyung pivots, opens the door and closes it on his path. He trudges to the second bathroom where he goes through his nightly routine, his parents and Jimin already tucked in bed and asleep.

He flops face first on his mattress a short instance later.

He stays there, immobile and partially suffocating in his pillow. His mind doesn't trail back to the wounds he has seen on Jungkook. They really don’t, which is why he is *not* debating on helping the Prince. He does not care about Jungkook, after all, and satisfied with his decision, Taehyung’s lids fall shut.

He lasts for less than ten minutes.

“For fuck’s sake.”

Taehyung pushes himself off his bed. He marches to the second bathroom and rummages through the cupboards. He retrieves two flat, round glass jars from it. He then makes his way out and stomps — quietly, his steps muffled by his fluffy slippers — to where he assumes Jungkook is sleeping in.

There’s light seeping from under the door.

Taehyung rattles his knuckles on the wood.

The door swings to reveal Jungkook. Taehyung doesn’t waste a single second to ram the jars in Jungkook’s chest. The Prince manages to capture them just in time.

“Green: antiseptic to clean wounds. Beige: soothing ointment for bruises and aching muscles,” Taehyung clarifies, because he’s sweet like that. “Don’t complain to me about your injuries again.”

“I never compl—”

“Don’t care.”

Taehyung wordlessly strides off, his retreat punctuated by the pit-a-pat of his mule slippers.

He feels a lot lighter for some inane reason. He locks the sentiment — and his bedroom — behind him. He crawls on his mattress and shuffles under the blankets this time. He tugs them up to his

chin, ready to be embraced in Morpheus' arms.

Morpheus is an incompetent twit.

Taehyung can't sleep, not from lack of trying.

His mind won't stop churning about everything that has gone down today and the umpteenth realization that he is to be married. To a human. The same one that is sleeping in his city, under his rooftop. It puts Taehyung on edge, as though a catastrophe is about to implode: perhaps the confirmation that the marriage has been a ploy to have the Prince infiltrating Taehyung's house in order to kill them all.

Or worse.

Maybe Jungkook knows *him.* Maybe he's a lackey of that man.

Taehyung is about to entirely give up on sleep in favor of a night flight when he hears some noises coming from outside his bedroom's door. More particularly on the left side of the abode, where the Prince's temporary room resides. Taehyung rises on his elbows. He strains his ears to listen.

The click of a door opening and closing echoes in the distance. It's trailed by barefooted steps. The person passes by Taehyung's door before climbing down the stairs.

Taehyung leaps out of his bed.

He opens one of the two bay windows framing his bed and leading to the balcony. He walks outside. A shiver rattles through him when he's hit by the freezing cold, and he uses his fire breath to warm himself up.

Taehyung deftly vaults on the cement fence of his balcony. He propels himself on the rooftop, the tiles groaning under his weight. He sneaks to the front of the house and crouches there, using the chimney to conceal himself. He doesn't have to wait for long before Jungkook appears, clad in his shoes, a hefty coat thrown over his pajama.

Jungkook glances left and right. Then he wedges a path through the carts and walks to the outskirts of the forest.

Taehyung's eyes narrow.

After lingering back for a couple minutes, Taehyung jumps from the rooftop down to the ground. His feet are cold on the wet grass as he stalks after the Prince.

Jungkook isn't difficult to find with the twigs he steps on and that snaps under his shoes, or with his breath that puffs out in mist. He wanders aimlessly, trekking this and that way then in a straight line. This adds to the list of fishy behavior the Prince has exhibited since Taehyung has first seen him.

Is there an objective to this walk? Is the Prince on his way to meet with a human? Or someone else?

Taehyung can't be certain yet, and so he continues to follow the Prince.

Jungkook halts when he reaches a clearing. He nears a hefty rock and props himself on it, drawing his knees up against his chest. Taehyung hides behind a tree, leaning to the side to peer ahead. The snake appears out of nowhere. Taehyung can't see it properly from where he is, but the serpent curls around Jungkook in a makeshift scarf.

Taehyung doesn't know what else he expects to hear or see, but the last thing his brain may have conjured is for the Prince to burst into tears.

The cries are intersected by sniffles and a sporadic whimper, muffled in Jungkook's arms that he wraps around his knees, head hung low and covered by the snake's one atop his crown.

"It must be hard on him to have been alienated all his life in his own home, and here too now."

Taehyung curses to himself.

He doesn't feel bad per se, but there is a sting that flares in his chest and that he pins on the ambient cold. At the very least, this display balances what has occurred today. Now *Taehyung* is the one witnessing one of the Prince's weaknesses, a knowledge that he hopefully won't have to use.

Having seen enough for now, and thinking that even the Prince is deserving of privacy in a moment like this, Taehyung walks away.

Jungkook's face is cradled in his palms, his shoulders shaking from the cold and the whimper that escapes his mouth.

The sensation of being watched vanishes.

Jungkook quietens.

He pauses and holds his breath to hear the rustle of leaves growing fainter and fainter until it disappears.

"Is he gone?" Jungkook whispers to his friend. There's a noise of confirmation. He sighs in relief and rests his forehead atop his knees, curling in to shield himself from the glacial breeze. "I'm so tired but I can't sleep. Everything is so— So unfamiliar. It's good, and I'm relieved to have left Amaris, but still. It's kinda scary."

Jungkook stiffens his hug around his legs, the cold already becoming unbearable in spite of how little he's been outside.

He yearns to have Namjoon and Yoongi with him. He wouldn't be as isolated then.

Jungkook isn't used to this: loneliness. He has nearly always had company with him, unwanted or not, whether it being his two friends or his helpers. Or *them.* He would usually value his alone time because of this, but now it's overwhelming. Even at night, the Kim family's house and forest is too desolate compared to the citadel that would commonly be inhabited by Namjoon, Yoongi or *them.*

At least he's not living at the citadel anymore. He'll still have to meet Seohyung and his father here and there, but he'll be away from them as he had forever dreamed of.

So it's not too bad, in retrospect. Not yet.

"I think only now is when I'll be able to take you out," Jungkook says to his friend. "I'm worried about them seeing you. They don't seem like terrible people, and you're not sensing any real bad intent from them, but they *are* protective. The son especially is. I don't trust what he'd do if he were to know all about you." His friend agrees with a hiss before disappearing in the ruby. "Do you want to be out again?"

Jungkook's friend makes a noncommittal sound of denial, having never been fond of being out in the cold.

"Let's go back to the house before I fuse with the rock, then. I'll let you out in the bedroom, okay? It should be fine if I lock the door and close the blinds. I think? We'll see." He unfolds his legs and stands. "I think we'll make new friends here." He glances behind him at the forest. "It'll be fun."

He rambles to his friend all the way to the outskirts of the forest, only shushing once he enters the house. Jungkook had expected Taehyung to await him with his eternal scowl, yet when he steps inside, the peaceful living room is devoid of a paranoid dragonborn.

"I guess pretending to cry worked," Jungkook whispers to himself, chuckling at the happy sound his friend makes in echo to Jungkook's happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Angry (as usual) and sliiiiiightly protective Taehyung (or is he?🤔) awaits you in the next chapter 👀🤍

❧ Twitter

— Characters' Visuals —

Woobin
Seungwon

— Chapter's Visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH3.

Jungkook's necklace
Jungkook's winter coat

Chapter 4: Perused Values

Chapter Summary

Taehyung and Jungkook visit Vanae's market. Secrets erupt here and there, all growing yet few unearthed.

Chapter Notes

Cw:

1) Brief mentions and references to physical abuse throughout the scene that starts with "Life has been rather monotone and dull."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It may come as a shock to most, but Taehyung *really* does not like the Prince.

However what Taehyung can admit with a pinch of bitterness is that Jungkook had good foresight when he had decided to bring furniture and necessities from Amaris' citadel.

The house that has now been deemed as The Newlyweds' Abode — according to Jimin's unwanted intervention —, shares a lot of similarities with Taehyung's childhood home when it comes to the layout and spaciousness.

The living, dining and kitchen space constitute a single room, separated with the living room on the left and the kitchen on the right when they enter.

The sparse walls are made of beige stones in the kitchen framed by columns of somber wood, while the rest of the house had been built with sturdy, lighter wood. The floor, a polished contrast to the foundations, is made with tiles of a dark gray in the kitchen and brown in the living room, the gentle colors of the residence accentuated by the usual touches of green from the plants peppering the place, courtesy of Dahee and Taehyung.

Windows open up the space, with a large and elongated one lining the walls above the kitchen counters, as well as bay windows forming part of the two adjacent walls of the living room. There's a glass solarium on the left side of the common room that Taehyung knows will soon become his favorite area of the house.

The furniture the Prince has brought with himself — like the light green sectional sofa, oak shelves, silver cutlery and more — nicely mingles with the rest of the house in an harmonious array of muted tones of brown, sage and red on some occasions. It's elegant, and Taehyung tries not to think about how adequately he and Jungkook have unknowingly matched each other's tastes.

Although he won't verbally formulate his contentment, Taehyung is pleased with the refined aesthetic the house exudes. He had loved building and designing it, especially the second floor where two bedrooms are situated, one larger than the other one that Taehyung has already designated as his own.

He had not anticipated living in the house with someone other than Jimin, meaning that Taehyung and Jungkook will have to share the same bathroom for the time being, a problem Taehyung will have to remedy by creating a second one soon.

A basement finishes the structure of the house, much smaller than the one in Taehyung's home.

And devoid of a dragonborns graveyard, which is a plus Taehyung is grateful for.

The major part of the morning has been spent breaking open crate after crate and assembling the furniture to store them within the new home. *House* , he corrects, the residence occupied by the human prince feeling like a compromise rather than a happy lair.

All the while, Taehyung has not spoken a single word to the Prince, a victory in his mind. He's been quietly working, only exchanging sporadic directions with his parents or Jimin.

Taehyung had, however, nearly broken his vow of silence when he had felt the Prince's gaze on him at some point during the moving in.

Taehyung had shed his thick cotton pullover at the time, feeling too hot from the constant carrying regardless of the cold weather seeping through the house's entrance doors. He had been left in a worn out, ashen tee — not black, for once, an event that Jimin had teased him for —, the shirt riddled with holes on the hem and at the stretched, loose collar.

It'd been an unbecoming sight to the Prince because his eyes had been darting on Taehyung every few minutes. Taehyung had glared at the Prince, but the latter had shrugged it off in favor of glancing at Taehyung's forearms. Or perhaps at Taehyung's fingers that had been soiled, an occurrence that the regal human must consider repulsive, he who most likely never dares presenting himself with a flake of dust on his skin.

Nevertheless, in spite of that lone near incident, Taehyung had held on to his vow, showing an unparalleled restraint to reign in the urge to snap and bark at Jungkook to stop *ogling.*

Right now, Taehyung is occupied outside with arranging the flowers that he roots in the long window box lining the kitchen's window. When he peers ahead inside the house, he can see the Prince trudge in the living room, his brown bear coat draped on his shoulders. Taehyung hasn't seen the snake again, and he hasn't pressed the subject yet in a feat of benevolence.

Dahee, Junhyun and Jimin had left half an hour ago or so to *'give them space'* because Taehyung has to *'make Jungkook feel welcomed and stop frowning already, Son, or you'll have wrinkles worse than your grandfather's'* Dahee had said. A pile of nonsense, if one were to ask Taehyung. Why should he bother evincing an hospitality he won't mean? It'll only serve to—

"It's pretty."

Taehyung isn't the kind of dragonborn to startle easily, however he has noticed the way Jungkook slithers around with little to no sound like the viper that he is — and has.

“You like gardening?”

Crouched and fingers sank in the soil that he parts to dig little holes in, Taehyung slowly turns his head toward the disturbance. “How, exactly, is that any of your concern?”

“I’m curious.” Jungkook wraps his arms around himself and tucks his hands under the armpits of his fluffy coat.

“Why don’t you go be curious in the forest.”

The Prince has the gall to roll his eyes with an irate moue. “You’re gonna be like that all the time?”

“Oh no.” Taehyung's lips curl around a smile that he hopes to be as jeering as his words are. “I’ll be far, *far* worse if you don't leave me be.”

“You’re a prick, you know that?”

“Yes. Now skedaddle.” Taehyung waves a hand somewhere toward the outskirts of the forest. “Go pester someone else. Preferably as far away from me as possible.” It’s at the mumbled ‘bastard’ that Taehyung looks at the Prince again. “Your parents really were an antidote to that venom of yours, huh? I’m sure you wouldn’t be so impertinent if they were here."

“Aren’t you the one who complained about ‘forged compliance’?” Jungkook’s voice takes a harsher and deeper tone as his brows furrow into a glower.

“I do *not* sound like that."

“You do.”

“I fucking do not.”

“You *are* ,” Jungkook notes with a quirked brow.

“How about you shut up before I burn your ass to a crisp?”

Jungkook doesn’t look scared, as though aware that Taehyung wouldn’t stay true to his warning. “Before you do any of that,” he starts amidst a shudder that rattles his body, “can you help me, please?”

“No.”

At this final negation, Taehyung’s attention narrows back on his pretty flowers.

Taehyung has always had issues with the chaos his temper can be, and as he had become older, he had realized that nature can help him find a peace that can sometimes feel inaccessible when his sentiments overwhelm him. So whenever he can feel the ire — or fury, on a bad day — flicker within him, he opts to engage in gardening, or at least thinking about *his pretty flowers* that he will grow in a *pretty* garden once he finds the time to do so.

It’s therapeutic, really, and it works like wonder on Taehyung.

“It’s about the fireplace,” Jungkook continues, and Taehyung’s thoughts that had derailed drive back to the Prince. “There’s no matches and it’s freezing inside. I can’t stop shivering.”

“We’re going to Vanae’s main city in a few minutes. There's no point in lighting a fire inside. You can wait."

“Fine,” Jungkook concedes with a sigh. He walks back to the living room and settles on the second armchair, curling in on himself with his coat.

Twenty minutes or so later, the decoration of the kitchen window box is completed. Taehyung gathers the couple tools he had with him to trudge inside the house and leave them in the sink. He promptly washes them then his hands and face.

“We’re leaving,” Taehyung announces moments later.

“Alright.”

Taehyung slides on his pullover and makes his way to his bedroom to grab a pouch of coins and another of gems in case he needs to buy something more expensive. After what, he retrieves a bundle of ropes from the basement, some blankets and a large net.

“Is there anything coming to mind that we should get?” Jungkook asks, elbows propped on the kitchen counter.

“A cooler.” Taehyung begins to tie the thick ropes on the corners of the net to make the transportation easier during the flight.

“Oh, yes. Ice too, then.”

“No need. I can get that.”

Jungkook surveys Taehyung, this flicker of wonder back on his face. “Can you control ice?”

Taehyung entirely ignores the personal question. “Add bathroom stuff in general.”

Jungkook hums as he dips the quill in the jar of ink and scribbles on his paper. “I'm putting soap and necessities like those together. Maybe we should buy in bulk so we have stocks that will last for the winter?”

“Sure. Add wood planks, light and hard."

“Wood? We’re surrounded by a forest.”

“Just add it.”

“I’m putting candles and candelabras. Some oil lamps too. I don’t see any. Anything else?” Jungkook wonders and Taehyung pensively observes the house. “We’ll need food.”

“Obviously. No need to write that down."

“You’re at the head of the hunting squadron with your mother, right?”

“What about it?”

“We won’t have to worry about meat or buying it at the market?”

“Yes. Add salt. Clay pots, large pans. Bricks,” Taehyung says, then shakes his head. “No, not bricks, Jimin’s bringing me some later today.”

“What’s this all about?” Jungkook frowns while diligently writing down what Taehyung lists.

“Do you know anything about food preservation?”

“Not really,” Jungkook sheepishly admits.

“Right. I guess you never had to worry about that."

“You make it sound like the status I was born with is my fault or was my choice,” Jungkook retorts before blowing on the note to dry the ink.

“Whatever.” Taehyung isn’t about to hear the whining of a human born with a golden spoon embedded with diamonds in it. “Add what I said.”

“I did. I think we’re good, but anything else?”

“The rest I’ll remember.” *Probably*, Taehyung thinks to himself and he gathers the net to sling it around his right shoulder. “Bring your own money. I’m not paying for everything.”

Jungkook searches through the inner pocket of his coat to brandish a pouch that he sways next to his head then puts back where it was hidden. “What are the ropes for?”

“You. Maybe if I entirely wrap you in them, I’ll have the chance to not hear you run your mouth anymore. The weight should be enough to drop you in the ocean and let you drown in it.”

“Even then I could haunt you and hum you to an early grave.”

Jungkook hums a purposefully off tune song as he walks toward Taehyung and he doesn’t stop, even when Taehyung tells him to. It’s only when Taehyung’s hand flies up to cover Jungkook’s mouth that the Prince falls quiet.

Only to continue humming a lull later.

“See?” Jungkook says with a smile that Taehyung responds with a glower.

“Just—” Taehyung pinches the bridge of his nose. His mind flits back to the pretty flowers he had planted, focusing his thoughts on the soothing scents of the honeysuckle and witch-hazel. “Shut up.”

“You didn’t tell me what the ropes are for.”

"And you didn't explain yourself about your snake."

Jungkook clasps his hands behind and steps back. "I'll concede that point to you."

“Just be quiet and get ready.” Taehyung swings the door open and struts outside, the Prince on his trail and hopping on one foot then on the other as he slides on his shoes. Taehyung drops the net with the blankets wrapped inside, then he wordlessly shifts to his dragon counterpart.

“How are we—” Jungkook pauses, his hands stilling where his fingers are carding through his bangs. “Oh.” He stares at the talon Taehyung presents to him, and after a beat of hesitation, he climbs on its palm. He tugs his coat’s hood over his head to pinch the sides against each other in a makeshift mask against the cold. “My friend and I were worried the first time, but I loved the flight we had. My friend not so much, though." He cranes his neck to peep up at Taehyung through the small alcove that his hood and scarf offer, only his eyes and reddening nose peeking out. “You're lucky to be able to fly.”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook but says nothing — not that he could — and he grabs the net with his other talon.

He takes off, impatient to be done with the outing.

He and Jungkook fly above the forest, Vanae’s main market place twenty minutes or so of flight away. The Prince doesn’t speak again, his head held high and never dipping to peer down. Taehyung wonders if Jungkook is afraid of heights, which would be quite ironic in light of Taehyung’s lineage.

They pass over a house a while later. Jungkook moves as he turns sideways.

Taehyung surveys the Prince.

For the first time in the past ten minutes, Jungkook peers at the canopy they hover in the sky. Jungkook’s head tilts to the side, his hands sprawling when he leans forward on Taehyung’s talon to scrutinize a point below. Taehyung can’t tell if it’s a tree that enraptures the Prince, or if it’s the residence whose inhabitants loiter in the garden, the middle aged mates former guardians of Taehyung.

Taehyung still hasn't spoken to the couple in over nine years, and he averts his eyes from the house when remorse begins to wrench at a place near his heart.

Nevertheless, Jungkook’s sudden interest is odd.

It has an intent to it, not solely born from a mindless curiosity. His eyes are widened and they narrow before his lids fall shut. Taehyung slows down his pace to scout the area, but he can’t figure out what may have called the Prince’s unwavering focus amidst the unremarkable trees and scant birds.

When Jungkook’s lids flutter open, his eyes are glazed over. The Prince’s mind has wandered to a distant realm too far away for Taehyung to grasp it.

Jungkook eventually shakes his head and blinks.

Taehyung can’t help the grumble that rises at the back of his throat. The sound catches Jungkook’s attention who peeps up at him. The dazed, nearly dissociated look on Jungkook’s face is gone, replaced by a pinched lip smile.

The Pandora box the Prince makes clicks open as Taehyung stores in it another of Jungkook’s oddities.

“Oh my God! This is—”

Taehyung snatches the list from Jungkook’s hand to tear it in half. He keeps one piece to himself and gives the other to the Prince. “You buy this half, I handle the other.”

“What?” Jungkook says with a hint of incredulity. “I don’t know my way around here.”

“You can learn, and if not...” Taehyung shrugs as a dismissive conclusion. “Enjoy.”

On this last word, Taehyung pivots, ignoring Jungkook’s hissed protests. He strides through the masses, careful to not accidentally step on any limb, some of the dragonborns populating the market having traits of their dragon counterpart out like their wings, horns or tails that swish around in their path.

Taehyung doesn’t intend to spend an afternoon with Jungkook, a jinx he would rather not subject himself with. They can very well split the shopping endeavor between the two of them, ensuring not only a faster completion of their errands, but also a temporary lull away from the human prince.

Taehyung is reading the note to check what he has to buy when an authoritative hand grips onto his arm. He swivels around, ready to bark a retort at the forceful fingers digging into his bicep, however instead of being faced with a dragonborn, he’s met with the glare of a human prince.

“You are *not* leaving me to fend on my own in a foreign city where I know no one and won’t be able to find my way anywhere *or* carry half of what’s on the list,” Jungkook snips, his voice clipped.

“Let go of me.” Taehyung crosses the foot separating him from Jungkook to stare him down. “Right now.”

“I will if I shop with you.” Jungkook doesn’t relent his hold as Taehyung leans forward and seizes the Prince’s wrist. His gaze is born into Taehyung’s, his glare reflecting Taehyung’s growing ire.

“Now, I’m giving you a choice because I’m nice.” Taehyung’s fingers tighten around the wrist. He could crush the bone to a point of incurable if he desired to, and he has half a mind to do so when a repulsed shudder crawls up his back, the feeling of a human manhandling or holding or simply *touching him* flaring every single repulsed nerve in his body. “Either you let go of me on your own, or *I* make you let go.”

Jungkook must sense that the warning is not one spoken as a playful zest because the pulp of his fingers loosens around Taehyung’s arm. “Just—” He fully releases his grip. “You wouldn’t like how out of depth you’d feel if you were thrown into a human city without a guide, wouldn’t you?”

“That would never happen in the first place,” Taehyung rebuts and takes a step back, suffocated. The distance from Jungkook — or anyone else right now — still doesn’t suffice to alleviate the angsty prickles on Taehyung’s skin, but this is as far as he can be without losing Jungkook in the dense crowd bumping into them. “But if I were to, I’d stride with confidence.”

“Would you? This isn’t what happened back at the citadel.”

The humiliation coalesces with the churning anger. Taehyung's hands ball up into fists in his pants' pockets.

In retrospect, he had known that Jungkook would eventually mention this weakness and use it in his favor, but Taehyung had foolishly believed that the Prince to be above such low mockery.

A flash of surprise washes over Jungkook's face. Or regret, perhaps. Taehyung can't tell, and he frankly doesn't care.

"I'm sorry." Jungkook's gaze casts low on the ground. "That was—"

Taehyung yanks Jungkook's piece of paper. He turns around and narrows his attention on the list to bite back any cruel retort.

If described as a euphemism, the shopping affair is terse and quiet. If defined in a more accurate way, it would be deemed as glacial and insufferably winded.

Taehyung doesn't utter another word to Jungkook, the latter silent as well. The two only talk to the merchants with curt *'Thank you'* on Taehyung's part and the sporadic questions on Jungkook's regarding the products. The one time Jungkook addresses Taehyung again is when he recalls needing to buy matches and then asking Taehyung if he could lead them to a stand selling those.

Taehyung's mood is atrocious, and to his dismay, it does not improve the slightest after acquiring a bag of chocolate chips that he munches on.

They've managed to buy most of what is on the list, saved for the food that they had decided to retrieve at the end of their journey through the market.

To Taehyung's relief, no one pays attention to him.

The streets are packed with dragonborns rushing to stock up on goods and necessities for the winter, while the sellers are occupied with shouting their discounts and quality of merchandise, sometimes arguing about the prices with their customers. So no one seems to notice the presence of a human, and most importantly of Amaris' prince trailing behind Taehyung like a lost hatchling.

Taehyung hadn't thought about the possible gush of interest that could have erupted at his people seeing him with his human betrothed — or with a human in general —, and his shortcoming has thankfully not led to any uproar from Vanae's dragonborns.

Taehyung and Jungkook make their way to the exit now that the remaining bullet points of their list have been taken care of; the food, ingredients, spices and more now all secured in protective paper bags and blankets.

Jungkook is still enthralled by the place that he examines like a damn tourist, making little noises of interest or curiosity whenever they walk by this or that shop.

Absorbed in mulling over how eager he is to get back to the house, Taehyung belatedly notices the absence of a certain human. His head turns left and right, looking this and that way, but no sight of Amaris' prince can be found.

"For Elders' sake."

He could leave Jungkook behind, but the Prince would be stuck at the market and wouldn't have any other means of transport to come back to the house. Taehyung wouldn't be opposed to it, but whether he accepts it or not, some duties come with being Jungkook's betrothed, and one of them is to avoid an outcome of Jungkook being found dead in the forest or anything equally dire.

Taehyung heavily groans and turns on his heel.

He attempts to track Jungkook's scent but it's muddled with those of food, spices and thousands of dragonborns bustling the market. So Taehyung squeezes through the crowd to, once near a wall, leap on a barrel, summon his wings out and fly off.

A few fully shifted dragons are in the sky, Taehyung greeting and smiling at one of them.

He scans the area, flying down some streets devoid of the man he's looking for.

It doesn't take long for Taehyung to spot a familiar mop of perfectly styled hair. He lands on the stone fence of a staircase. He wills away his wings while he jumps down and he trails after the Prince.

Taehyung is about to yell Jungkook's name when the human freezes on his spot. Jungkook is staring straight ahead in an alley that is deserted save for a group of kids running through it with laughter. Taehyung joins Jungkook and says "Wha—"

Jungkook shushes with a flippant jut of his index finger.

Taehyung's right eye twitches.

Jungkook hums and his observation of their surroundings is interrupted by a shiver that wracks through him. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Taehyung says and when Jungkook paces down the alley, Taehyung begrudgingly follows him. "I'm not hearing anything."

"I swear I heard something. Like… crying? Or… Or I don't know, but it was a weird sound."

Taehyung strains his ears, but aside from the ambient brouhaha of the market, no other noise grabs his attention.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung but his eyes skim behind on the ground before they move upward again, as though following something climbing up the side of the building. When Taehyung twists to check what animal Jungkook may have seen, nothing is there.

Jungkook's face etches with puzzlement. "I thought I saw something."

"Are you insane? And I mean literally so."

"No. I'm not insane," Jungkook deadpans. "Anyway. We can go. Sorry for disappearing. I just heard a sound."

As if.

Taehyung clutches the collar of Jungkook's coat and unceremoniously shoves the Prince against the wall.

Jungkook doesn't appear disconcerted by this. Instead he says "This is the second time you push me against a wall. A third, and I might believe you have some ulterior motive."

"What are you hiding?" Taehyung deflects, unable to keep at bay the rancor that seeps in his raspy timber. "Is this about your pet snake?"

"She's not my pet and I'm not—"

"Don't lie. You're hiding something. I can tell. Could tell from the beginning."

Jungkook visibly fights back this reflexive urge to mellow down because he slackens in Taehyung's clutch for a brief moment before his hand flies up to clench around Taehyung's wrist.

"You could tell, yet you agreed to the wedding. Either your foolishness is your insidious killer, or your confidence is." Jungkook's nails bore into Taehyung's sleeve with an unexpected strength, and if it wasn't for the thick fabric, they would sink into the flesh and most likely draw blood. "Unless you have a secret too. However, rest assured that mine won't harm you."

"I have a hard time believing this when I can see the color of your necklace pulse. Is your snake itching to bite me?"

"If she or my secret was to hurt you, they already would have, considering how often you've given us a reason to strike back."

It could still be a slow and calculated ploy to have Taehyung put his guard down. "I'll find out what your secret is, Viper."

"Good luck with that." Jungkook grins and the view is so damn infuriating that Taehyung has to release his hold on the Prince to step away. "In the meantime, I'll be working on figuring out *your* secret."

"I'm not hiding anything, unlike you."

"Don't think I haven't noticed your immediate approval of this wedding in spite of how much you hate humans. There has got to be some really, *really* convincing reason for you to accept. Perhaps the reason is plural, because I highly doubt you're the kind of man to discard your beliefs and judgments for something as mundane as expansion or political assets. You're clearly too prideful and obstinate for that. So, I wonder…"

Jungkook folds his hands behind his back and crosses the distance. Taehyung refuses to walk backward, even when only a few inches separate their faces. Jungkook leans forward as he tilts his head on one side, his hair brushing against his cheeks at the motion. His smile is ever present, its playfulness undeterred by Taehyung's scorn.

"What could possibly unravel the callous Kim Taehyung into a yarn of compliance?"

Memories of skeletons laced with this peculiar, lingering tang that Taehyung erupts in his mind.

If the Prince is to learn about the plague and share this knowledge with Amaris' Queen and King, Taehyung can only imagine the disaster that would befall on dragonborns. He's aware that Dahee and Junhyun have been somewhat convinced by the token of trust Jungkook has given them, however Taehyung knows humans better.

“I’ll figure out your secret before you do so with mine."

“Should we make a bet?”

This competitive spark in Taehyung predictably flickers alive at Jungkook’s dare.

“If you find out first, you win, and you get to ask anything of me for a day. Vice versa if I win."

“That’s a boring bet with boring stakes and rewards."

An affronted pout appears on Jungkook's lips. “Then offer something better.”

“Nah let’s go with that,” Taehyung rethinks when he ponders on what he could demand of the Prince. Probably something annoying like doing the dishes. “Whoever figures out the secret first makes the other his servant for a day.”

“Excellent.” Jungkook rocks back and forth on the ball of his feet. He gnaws on his lower lip, doing nothing to hide the amusement that paints his face. “Can’t wait for my betrothed to become my temporary maid.”

Taehyung barks out a mirthless laugh. “You’re so damn naïve. Your mind rivals that of a child.”

“Speak all you want, but I know I’ll win,” Jungkook assures in a finality that he punctuates with a jut of his chin. He twirls around to walk down the street.

Taehyung waits until Jungkook is at the end of the alley to say “It’s the other way around, dumbass!”

“I knew that,” Jungkook mumbles when he reaches Taehyung’s side again, a pink hue on his cheeks that Taehyung doesn’t believe to be only due to the cold. “Prick."

Taehyung doesn’t reply.

As they trudge to the street market, Taehyung slows down to study the building that had called Jungkook’s attention earlier. When he still sees nothing out of the ordinary, he accelerates his pace, the pit-a-pat of the Prince’s shoes echoing behind him.

“Hello, lovebirds, and welcome b—”

Taehyung zaps Jimin’s chest, not withholding his arcane as much as he usually would. “Call us that one more time and I’m squeezing those bricks up your ass."

“And I’m never helping you again, asshole.” Jimin drops to his burden on the ground. “Hey, Jungkook. How was your trip?”

Jungkook launches himself in a tirade about how *‘gorgeous the market was!’* , and how *‘so many smells, stands and boutiques there are!’* He also vents over how eager he is to visit the place again without being rushed, a jab that Taehyung deftly disregards.

“If someone has the wealth to spend money there every day, it’s definitely you,” Jimin chuckles. “There are a few fun shops hidden in some nooks. I’ll have to show them to you.”

“Oh! Yes, I’d—”

“The groceries and everything else won’t tidy up themselves,” Taehyung interjects with a pointed look aimed at Jungkook.

“Yes, yes.” Jungkook does not roll his eyes, but he makes up for it with a flippant sigh.

“It’s for the smokehouse? Need help with that?” Jimin nods toward the bricks piled in the basket that is precariously standing upright.

“Yeah, and no, it’s fine. I’d rather do it myself.”

“I’ll get back to the city then. Good luck with…” Jimin makes a vague motion toward the sprawled open net that is stuffed with all kinds of knickknacks. “All this.” He shifts to his dragon self and waves a talon at Jungkook when the latter shouts a *‘Goodbye’* to him.

With the Prince’s help, who surprisingly doesn’t shy away from lifting the heavy purchases they have made this afternoon — aside from those that are too hefty for a human’s puny strength —, storing what they have bought where it belongs doesn’t take too much time.

Once done, Jungkook warms the house with the lit matches that he tosses in the fireplace while Taehyung gathers the materials he needs.

The cooler is already installed in the kitchen — courtesy of Junhyun —, the wooden box lined with zinc tucked next to the sink, the black stove and oven then following suit. Taehyung won’t need the inside cooler anymore in a week or so, the coldness of the winter air will soon suffice to keep everything frozen outside.

Having taken a day off for the moving in and construction of the smokehouse that he had planned for today, Taehyung settles himself in the garden. His toolbox and everything else he needs to cut, sand, then piece together the wood planks are laid next to him.

After discarding his pullover on the ground, he starts his project. Something is missing, however, and Taehyung enters the house to retrieve it.

“Do you want some help?” Jungkook offers, lounging on the couch.

Taehyung pauses and quirks a brow. “Because you’d know how to build? Or simply hold a hammer?”

“I know how to hold a hammer, yes, Taehyung. Although I’m not adept when it comes to building smokehouses, or anything of the sort, for that matter. I never learned, but I could if you teach me.”

“I'll pass. I’d rather not have you anywhere near me,” Taehyung says and makes his way to the stairs.

“Enjoy yourself then,” Jungkook shrugs.

A few seconds later, Taehyung walks inside his bedroom. He plucks a beige cotton headband that he slides down his neck before dragging it back up to keep his hair out of the way. He climbs down

to the living room then grabs the jar filled with pieces of dried meat. He gnaws on one and glances at Jungkook.

The Prince looks like the epitome of coziness: tightly wrapped in a blanket, books and papers surrounding him on the sofa, a cup of what Taehyung recognizes as hot chocolate held in one hand, a quill in the other. Even the serpent seems to bask in tranquility, the snake's tail dangling off Jungkook's legs and lazily twitching on the carpet.

As Taehyung exits the house, he wonders if Jungkook is investigating this supposed primordial stone he had spoken of during dinner. Neither Jimin, Taehyung's parents or Taehyung himself have yet to find anything regarding the stone, and Taehyung doubts that the Prince will from where he's cuddled up on the couch.

Taehyung quickly gets to work, itching to do something with his hands and relax as he builds.

Except that Taehyung doesn't solely construct.

He has a hobby, and similar to his appreciation for flora and botany, it's one that very few are privy to the existence of. It's not that he's ashamed of it, or as though it is something unusual for dragonborns. He simply treasures this pastime — passion, really — to a point where he wishes to only share it with those he sees as his family.

And the Prince, unfortunately.

Taehyung won't be able to conceal this from Jungkook. He could try, but it'd induce too many questions from the human that Taehyung does *not* want to deal with. He could also pretend that his beautiful work is the one of another dragonborn, but he internally scowls at the thought.

Taehyung likes to carve and sculpt wood, and he's damn good at it.

He tends to prefer sculpting small, miniature pieces, achieving a rare peace in chiseling tiny scales on tiny wings of *tiny dragons* with his equally tiny tools. It's adorable, and most importantly, it's gratifying to watch the amount of details he can implement come to life, no matter how small and intricate the piece may be.

He has a whole collection of figurines that has gained in companions over the years. They aren't just dragons but also animals and creatures of all kinds. And of wolves and foxes, the two groups granted two separate areas on his display glass shelves.

So, amidst the insipid, boring task of sawing and nailing the planks of wood together, Taehyung stimulates himself by carving the upper part of the doors that will close the two rooms of the smokehouse. Because he's self-centered and arrogant like that, he chooses to draw the head of a dragon on the left door, and a fox on the right one.

"God... It's stunning."

Taehyung jolts.

The tip of the gouge pierces through the wood, effectively ruining the eye he had been painstakingly chiseling.

Taehyung deeply inhales and exhales, lest he turns around to seize the Prince by the collar and throw him so high in the sky he'd hopefully be disintegrated by the stratosphere.

"I'm… Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I was walking loudly, though, and I also called your name. Four times."

Sitting on the ground, Taehyung twists his head and has to crane his neck to peer up at Jungkook. "Do you know what this is?" He raises his tool to show it to the Prince.

Jungkook shakes his head.

"This is a gouge. It's used to carve wood. Do you have any idea of what else could be carved with this gouge?"

"Clay?"

"*Eyes*."

Jungkook blinks a few times.

"I can gouge eyes with this. I have before." Taehyung hasn't, but Jungkook needs to realize that bothering Taehyung when the latter is sculpting warrants a death or two. "You'd be surprised at how easily eyes can be scooped out of one's head."

Jungkook hums. "But what if I bite your hand before you get to gouge my eyes out?"

"I'd dislocate your jaw."

There's an undecipherable glint in Jungkook's gaze that does not have its place considering what Taehyung has just promised.

"Are you really that strong?"

Taehyung, for good measure and to send a message, takes a piece of chopped tree trunk that he splits in half with his bare hands, a splinter grazing against Jungkook's temple. Jungkook crouches and curls his arms around his knees while he studies the two pieces of trunk that Taehyung drops by his feet.

"Is your body strength proportional to the force of your arcane?"

"The force of my arcane?"

"Literally so. One of your breaths is force, right?" Jungkook clarifies. "Along with lightning and fire. I don't think you can use ice, actually, because you said 'get ice' earlier which implies that you can't produce it yourself. How come you can use several breaths? Isn't it usually one or two at most per dragonborn, from what I've read recently? Do you have more than three breaths? And if yes, how many?"

Taehyung deflects the barrage of questions with one of his own. "How do you know I can use force?"

"I wasn't sure but you just confirmed it to me," Jungkook snickers with a cheeky smile.

“Fucking viper.” Taehyung focuses back on the fox’s head he’s sculpting, the dragon one finished an hour ago.

“Is it proportional or not?”

“The only way I’m willing to answer this is by demonstrating it on you and hopefully squashing you in the process.” Taehyung attempts to rectify the eye that has become a horrendous hole because of the Prince’s unsought distraction.

“You like to threaten people with violence, huh?”

“Not people. *Humans."*

“Why?”

“Because violence is all that your kind understands.” Taehyung grits his teeth together, his fingers flexing around the wood and the handle of the gouge. He rolls his shoulders and he taps the index of his left hand on the door, counting down to ten, then up and down again.

Jungkook must sense the sudden veer in Taehyung’s mood because he rises on his feet. “I’m sorry about your piece. I really didn’t mean to take you by surprise. I was just curious and wanted some company.” He doesn’t linger for a reply, smart enough to know he won’t have one.

It takes a while to quell down the discomfort and trepidation that has surged within Taehyung, or the ache that is rendering his scars sore and tight with tension.

He at least manages to channel his upset on the sculpture that he salvages, shaping and smoothly merging the hole with the chiseled fur surrounding it. The fox resembles Minsoo now, with an eye missing and a scar marking the lid, which in retrospect turns out to be quite the serendipity born from a mistake.

The house’s entrance door opens at one point, Taehyung now more aware of his surroundings to avoid another mishap. Footsteps approach, then an arm that deposits a cup next to Taehyung’s hip.

“I brewed some coffee,” Jungkook announces. “I don’t know how you like it, but I added some milk and one sugar.”

Taehyung does not even have the time to think a *‘thank you’* before Jungkook jogs back inside, the blanket wrapped around him swirling in his path.

The cup of coffee is left untouched.

Technically speaking, Taehyung knows it isn’t poisoned, but he justifies his reason for not drinking the beverage by telling himself that it *could* be spiked, rather than admitting that a childish rejection is at the core of his refusal.

It would be a waste of potentially good coffee though, Taehyung muses minutes later.

It’s a gust of freezing wind that tilts the scale in the cup’s favor.

Taehyung brings the mug to his lip to take a sip. He swiftly spits out its content on the grass. “Fucking hell.”

“Is it bad?” Jungkook pipes up from behind.

Taehyung pivots to see Jungkook’s head peeking out of the doorway. “It’s cold.” There’s a beat of silence that he uses to warm up the unexpectedly good coffee with his hand.

“You’re a bit dramatic, aren’t you?”

“Add more milk and two sugars instead of one next time,” Taehyung quips, just to see the way Jungkook’s brows will knit while his lips will purse in a downturn moue.

The Prince throws off Taehyung’s assumptions by skipping toward him as his doe eyes expectantly peer down at Taehyung. “I can redo it for you.” Jungkook doesn’t wait for a response. He plucks the cup from Taehyung’s grasp and rushes to the house.

Taehyung stares where the Prince had once been. He’s nonplussed, even when Jungkook comes back a couple minutes later holding a steaming cup of coffee that he hands to Taehyung with a small smile.

“Here. More milk and two sugars. Tell me if you like it this way or if I should change something. I’m still learning.”

Taehyung had thought Jungkook wouldn’t put on the act of compliance with him anymore, but then again, what else other than a mindless doll is there to expect from Amaris’ prince?

Taehyung sips on his warm coffee.

And he immediately spits it out again when a bitterness suffuses Taehyung’s taste buds. “What the *fuck*.”

Jungkook’s expression has an air of conceit to it. His devious gaze slowly lowers to settle on Taehyung. “I forgot to mention that I included a handful of salt for an added flavor. You didn’t say anything regarding this.”

“You fucking—”

“You’d be shocked to know that good things will happen to you if you ask nicely instead of being an absolute prick to someone showing you some kindness."

Taehyung doesn’t get to snap a retort at Jungkook before the latter strides off. His and Taehyung’s gaze meet through the wall of bay windows separating the living room from the garden. Jungkook mouths a *‘Prick’* that he punctuates by sticking his tongue out like a damn five year old.

Taehyung could stoop down to Jungkook’s childish level and flip the bird to the Prince, which is exactly what he does, his response received with a laugh that he frowns at because his ire is *not* a source of hilarity.

Life has been rather monotone and dull.

Taehyung must have exchanged a grand total of perhaps five to ten words with Jungkook yesterday, and an additional couple more this morning.

They have both been keeping to themselves.

Taehyung is cooped up outside or in his bedroom, while the Prince has been spending most of his time settled at the dinner table to study, investigate, or do whatever it is that the future heir of a human kingdom does.

Today is another one that Taehyung has delegated to rest and ease himself in growing more accustomed to the routine of a soon to be married man. However it feels like an impossible task at the moment. It's partially caused by this new abode he hasn't acclimated to yet, but also a result of the disruptions tampering with his nights in the form of closing doors, pitter-patter of shoes and rustles of clothes.

Every night, without ever missing one, Jungkook heads outside to come back around an hour later.

Taehyung hasn't followed the Prince like the first time he had caught him sneaking out, but their discussion about exposing each other's secret has been replaying in his mind.

Jungkook is hiding something beyond his already strange pet snake, and if it's linked to his nightly strolls in the forest, Taehyung has decided to figure out the countenance of it soon.

"Morning," Jungkook says as Taehyung enters the kitchen.

Taehyung pours himself a cup of coffee. There's some pancakes piled on a plate and he doesn't bother asking their provenance when he takes three of them.

His bedroom had felt especially cold this morning. So, in spite of his aversion to being anywhere near the human Prince, Taehyung occupies the living room for the afternoon, sitting on the carpet. The fireplace is already warming the area, and an additional source of warmth is found in the sunlight beaming through the windows that illuminates the coffee table Taehyung works on.

He and his exploration squad had ventured to the north-east a few weeks ago. The map he had sketched lies crumpled on one side of the table. He has a larger, blank parchment paper sprawled in front of him.

Half an hour later, belly full, body warmed up and a quill in hand, Taehyung launches himself in drawing the map of the series of islands his squadron had discovered.

Enraptured with his delineating of borders and calculations of the scaled down map, Taehyung doesn't see the afternoon pass by, soon forgetting about the presence of the Prince also loitering in the armchair that he has deemed as his own — not The Armchair.

The peaceful lull is broken after a while, to Taehyung's dismay.

"I talked to your mother yesterday."

"And?" Taehyung scrapes with a small blade the mistake he's made on the map.

"We'll have to confer with the wedding planners and the rest of the workers we hired for the ceremony."

“I’ll be busy,” Taehyung dismisses, retracing the line he had messed up by a few millimeters.

“Dahee said she’ll handle the hunting squadrons in your absence."

Taehyung frowns. His mother had not spoken a word about this to him. “I don’t care about what fare will be prepared for the wedding, the theme colors and whatnot.” The ceremony in general doesn’t interest Taehyung, and if it was up to him, it would not happen to begin with. “You can handle it yourself or delegate it to the wedding planners we’re paying for a reason.”

“You’re making this harder than it should be."

“I’m making it easier by not participating.”

“Do you truly not want to help? At all?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me your favorite colors."

“Nope,” Taehyung pops out the ‘p’. He glances at Jungkook and satisfaction swirls in him at the Prince’s irked moue.

“Prick.”

Taehyung hums, focusing his attention back on his map as a silence that is neither strained or exceedingly uncomfortable fills the room anew.

The day is rather serene as it seeps into late afternoon.

Jungkook is quiet and still, saved for the occasional instances where he vacates to visit the bathroom or rekindle the embers in the fireplace.

The snake creeps on the carpet at some point. It curls up into a ball near Taehyung but still at a certain distance, heeding his warning glare when it had tried to get a little closer. It almost seems like the serpent is guarding Jungkook, creating a barrier between him and Taehyung.

It’s not too bad, in spite of how alienating it is to live with two strangers, Taehyung muses. It could be better, with Jungkook simply *not* existing, but it could also be worse.

“So many windows is great for light and that sense of openness, but not so much to keep the heat in.” Jungkook shivers, regardless of the two blankets enveloping him and the burning fireplace.

“Add more logs and blankets.” Taehyung waves him off. Not that Jungkook’s discomfort matters to him, but if he has to listen to the Prince complain about *Taehyung’s house* that he initially built for *himself*, Taehyung might do something as drastic as calling off the engagement.

“That’s what I’ve been doing,” Jungkook mumbles, and Taehyung does not need to peer at him to know that the Prince is pouting. “I’m still cold.”

“That sucks.” Feeling particularly obnoxious, Taehyung produces some fire in his left hand that he pats on his nape to spread the warmth. He makes a show of it, the taunt neither accidental nor subtle.

“Prick,” Jungkook chuckles.

Another instance of quietude elevates between them that Jungkook annihilates for the third time.

“What are you working on?”

“Stop trying to have conversations with me.”

Jungkook lowers his notebook on his drawn up legs. "What have humans done to you for you to abhor the presence of one that has been cordial toward you?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“But some humans hurt you or someone you love, right? Or something equally bad. They must have because your hatred can’t be solely based on the Great War and its old rivalry. It'd be childish, even for you.”

“You don’t know me."

“Yes, but I’m learning, unlike you."

“I only agreed to this marriage for the mutual dowry we bring to our family, as I said multiple times. I don’t have an ounce of care in knowing more about you. Extend that indifference toward me.”

“We’ll have to approach some subjects eventually, more so at the beginning of our marriage.” Jungkook averts his gaze away from Taehyung. When he speaks again, his voice is barely audible, tightened by a cautious rasp. “Unless you don’t want to.”

All at once, Taehyung is reminded of Seungwon.

He can’t imagine that the vile dragonborn has given Jungkook any sort of weight in his words or choice about anything, even more for marital issues that may have certainly arisen.

“Alright.” Taehyung rests his quill on the coffee table. He leans back against the sofa’s cushion seat. “Let’s talk.”

Jungkook’s eyes dart on Taehyung. “About?”

“There are expected behaviors that will come with us being husbands since we'll have a pretense to maintain in front of everyone else,” Taehyung says and crosses his arms over his chest. “We should settle down our physical boundaries.”

“Oh. That’s…” Jungkook’s demeanor and gaze *softens* as he watches Taehyung. His lips press into a thin line that relaxes when he emits a sigh. “Mhm, I’d like that."

Jungkook’s timber is demure, however it’s not born from that annoying forged compliance. It’s different, somehow. More honest and strangely coming off as natural, for lack of a better word, and Taehyung doesn’t know what to make of it nor how he manages to notice this.

“Don’t touch my back, shoulders, nape or neck. The chest, legs and arms are fine.”

“What about feet?” Jungkook playfully wonders.

“Ask me that again and I’ll shove them down your throat.”

“How depraved…”

Taehyung groans. “You’re repulsive.”

Jungkook chuckles, mirth dancing in his eyes. “But duly noted. As for me, I’m okay with most. You can touch my back, lower back, neck or face. My chest and arms are fine too. I don’t mind if you rest your hands on my thighs as long as it’s not too high. I think that’s it?”

“Alright.” Taehyung may be uncomfortable with the discussion, but he’s glad to be breaching this subject early on before any accident can occur. If Jungkook were to slightly graze Taehyung’s shoulders, even if unintentionally, Taehyung can’t definitively say that he wouldn’t punch the Prince in a compulsory response. Taehyung has a feeling the sentiment is mutual considering the bloody ear lobe tale.

“What about kissing?”

“*What?”*

“We’ll have to kiss. At least once at the wedding."

“None on the mouth,” Taehyung articulates with as much disgust as he can convey. “Aside from during the ceremony.”

“If some question it, then—”

“Then they can eat a damn cactus for all I care. What we decide to show off of our relationship is our choice to make, whether it concerns the pretense or not. If someone has a judgment to make because we don’t swallow each other’s tongue in public, tell them to fuck off. And if not, send them to me so that *I* tell them to fuck off.”

“Okay.” Jungkook sounds happy for some reason. “Kisses on the cheek are fine though? At least those?”

Taehyung peers at the ceiling as he inhales. “Sparsely. Don’t overdo it.”

“I mean,” Jungkook begins, “I won’t be lapping at your cheek, if this is what troubles you.”

“Do you have to make everything sound so revolting?”

“Yes. It riles you up, it’s amusing,” Jungkook grins then takes a sip of his beverage. “That scowl on your face is always fascinating to observe. It's like watching lava roll down the side of a volcano.”

Taehyung doesn’t think he can do this anymore.

It’s quite impressive that he has managed to live with the human prince and creepy snake for so long already — because those few days of domesticity have felt like an interminable torment.

“So, everything regarding physical touches is settled for now, but what about the more verbal affection?” Jungkook asks.

Taehyung's lids fly open and he lifts his head from the sofa's cushion to confusedly survey Jungkook.

"Pet names?" Jungkook clears up. "Can I use any? Like my dear husband? My Love? My—"

"My name. Is *Kim Taehyung*."

"I'm throwing it out there, but you can use some with me."

"I'd rather swallow my tongue and die."

Jungkook, like the absolute manic man that he is, erupts into a series of ringing laughter. "This is really new."

"Yeah and you're a basket case."

"I'm used to people groveling and being cautious of every word they utter around me. But you just… You don't care about my status."

Taehyung huffs and grabs his quill. "Your status means nothing to me."

"I know. I like it. It's a nice change to be treated normally."

If Taehyung being an asshole — a truth that he concedes — equals being 'treated normally' to the Prince, Taehyung doesn't want to think about the type of attitudes Jungkook must have gotten used to.

"Is that all for public appearances?"

Taehyung makes a noncommittal sound of agreement as leans over his map.

"Although…"

Jungkook never finishes his sentence.

"What?" Taehyung presses.

Jungkook scrapes at the worn-out spine of the leather seat. "When we'll be with my parents, could you act... Uh... Satisfied?"

"Satisfied?"

"Satisfied with me."

Taehyung squints at him. "Why?"

"Because they'll want to know if I'm fulfilling my duties as your betrothed, especially the Queen." Jungkook tugs on the hoops adorning his left ear, not meeting Taehyung's gaze. "If I please you or not, if I'm good to you or not. If you want to carry on with the engagement or not. Considering how the last attempt with Seungwon had gone, I'm worried what would happen if they assume that I'm not… doing well enough."

"I don't know what you mean by 'acting satisfied' with you."

“What I mean is: order me around. You can even call me ‘doll’. I’m positive they’ll like to know how mindless and pliant you'd portray me as. Tell me what to do in front of them so that they can see I’m obeying you. As much as you despise this mostly fabricated aspect of me, my parents would loathe to see me be defiant with you. Plus they don’t know my compliance is forged, and I’d like to keep it this way.”

“Of course they know. It’s obvious.”

“It really isn’t. They know I have brief bursts of temper, but the Queen made sure to have me disciplined. Meanwhile *I* made sure to have her believe the corrections worked.”

“Brief bursts,” Taehyung parrots with disbelief. “They’ve been endless since you’ve arrived.”

“So you *are* learning things about me."

“Case in point.”

“Either way, all I want is for them to keep underestimating me,” Jungkook concludes as he slouches on his armchair and tugs the hem of the blanket closer to his neck.

“Why would you ever want that?” Taehyung shoots in spite of his vow to not befriend the Prince.

“Because it makes it easier for others to put their guard down. They’re more malleable and trusting if they believe that I’m stupid, naive and ignorant.”

Jungkook’s admitted confession is one that Taehyung has been aware of since the dinner at Amaris, yet it still baffles him that Jungkook can muster such a wickedly sharp mind. “You’re such a damn viper,” is all that Taehyung can say.

Jungkook has the indecency to giggle. “Yes, but do you agree with what I asked or not?”

“Sure."

“As I said, ordering me to do this or that, or fetch this or that for you will do the trick."

“I won't act nice.”

“There's no need for that, the Queen and King won't care,” Jungkook waves off.

“Pigs."

“Will you do it?”

Taehyung already regrets accepting this charade, but he nods anyway. Might as well achieve his good deed of the year.

Jungkook’s form that had tensed up unwinds. “Thank you... It's— Believe it or not, but you've been the most cordial man I've been promised to, humans and dragonborns confounded. So I'd rather avoid being married to someone else. Or Seungwon.”

“How so?”

“Before I left, my parents said that if it doesn't work out with your family, I would become Seungwon’s betrothed again, and that this time the wedding would go through no matter the cost. They're adamant about him.”

“They probably aren't. Seungwon is. He doesn't deal well with not being awarded what he desires.”

“I see."

Taehyung fiddles with his quill, his focus on the map poor.

He can’t evince any empathy for humans, but *fucking hell*. Thinking about anyone — even the annoying Prince — being wedded to Seungwon revolts Taehyung more than he'd assume.

“Would you?”

“Hm?”

“Marrying Seungwon,” Taehyung clarifies. “Would you let it happen if our arrangement was to be called off?”

“Yes, I would,” Jungkook answers, and what minuscule sliver of respect Taehyung withholds for the Prince vanishes. “But then I’d grab a knife and plunge it through his throat. Or something akin to this, depending on what tools I have at the time.”

Taehyung appraises Jungkook anew. “Good,” he approves, then looks down at his map.

“You seem to hate Seungwon more than me or other humans."

“Because I do.” Save for a handful of specific humans. “I’m sure you’ve seen why for yourself.”

“I have."

It doesn’t take a genius to detect the agitation that escalates and stiffens Jungkook's intonation. However, it takes an observant man to catch onto the way Jungkook’s thumb discreetly brushes at a faint scar on the apple of his left cheek. The motion is swift and distracted, but the voice at the back of Taehyung’s head nags at him once more.

“Seungwon gave that to you?”

Jungkook's body grows taut. Then he cups the side of his face, effectively hiding the scar as he angles his head down to peer at his book.

“Has he given you more than this one?” Taehyung carries on when the Prince remains quiet.

“It doesn't matter."

“How many?”

"It's not—"

"How many, Viper?"

“I said it doesn't matter. I don’t want to talk about it.” Jungkook’s glare settles on Taehyung but it’s dampened by the glaze that mists his eyes. “Don't push,” he warns. The snake hisses, making her way up Jungkook's chest to curl around his neck and right arm. The snake hasn't opened its eyes once since Taehyung has first seen it, and he wonders if it will now with the way it holds a defensive stance around Jungkook. “What Seungwon has done to me does not matter to my own parents, to you, or to anyone else aside from Namjoon and Yoongi, so why are you asking? Are you trying to humiliate me? Is this why—”

“I would never use this kind of thing to humiliate anyone.”

“Then why do you care to know?"

"Because…" Taehyung's throat clicks when he swallows. "Because I have an idea of how it feels."

Jungkook's gaze is searching when it finds Taehyung's. “It was just a few,” he confesses with a quiet voice, his face pinched into a frown. “Maybe three or four times. That’s all."

“Your parents knew?” Taehyung asks, and he’s impressed that he succeeds in doing so in spite of the arcane thundering within him.

Jungkook doesn’t speak. Instead he continues to silently study Taehyung. Then still without a word, Jungkook nods.

The quill snaps in half between Taehyung’s fingers. The staccato happens but it’s muted, only noticeable for him who can feel the roulette of his arcane simmer where his breath pouch is.

“Don’t ask me about this anymore,” Jungkook says after clearing his throat, unaware of the storm he has raised in Taehyung.

Taehyung answers with a curt nod, the apology that weighs his tongue too bitter to be uttered for a human.

Closing his eyes, Taehyung narrows his mind on his breaths’ imaginary roulette. He reaches a ghostly hand in his chest. It coils around the arrow, halting the erratic circles it had been drawing. It demands patience and an unyielding discipline for Taehyung to subdue his breaths’ whenever they grow untamed with his wrath.

However he always prevails his own arcane, akin to now where, a lull later, he shoves the arrow on the force aspect.

When Taehyung opens his eyes, and before he can prevent it, his index twitches toward one of the stools poised in front of the kitchen counter. The chair bursts and crumbles into splinters of wood under the pressure of the invisible gust of force.

“Fuck.”

Well.

Taehyung *always* prevails, he truly does, but it can sometimes be partial.

“I’m not cleaning this.”

“About Seungwon—”

“I swear to *God*, Kim Taehyung, if you don’t—”

“Let me finish you damn brat.” Taehyung snaps back, the two glaring at each other. “We’re bound to stumble on him one way or another, whether we want it or not.” Jungkook subdues at the statement. “When it’ll happen, you probably won’t be alone with him, but in the hypothesis that you do end up in a room where only you and Seungwon are in, if he does anything to you, if he raises his hands on you, or even if he touches you in any way you don't want, you tell me, and I’ll handle him.”

“I can handle him myself just fine,” Jungkook mumbles against the snake's head that bumps his nose.

“I’m not saying that you can’t."

“Then why should I tell you?”

Why indeed?

Taehyung pins it on his hatred for Seungwon, that it’s because if the dragonborn hurts Jungkook, it’ll finally give Taehyung a valid reason to expunge the vile pig from this world. “The why has no importance." He expects the Prince to demand an answer but Jungkook remains silent as he stares at Taehyung. “If it happens, you’ll come find me. And if you can’t or if I’m away, you tell me when I’m back. Understood?”

“What would you do to Seungwon?”

“ *Understood?”*

Jungkook tilts his head and levels Taehyung with a stony look. “Yes, *Darling*, understood."

“Don’t call me that.”

“Every action has consequences. You being a prick will lead to me being impossibly insufferable. Bratty,” Jungkook adds, echoing the way Taehyung tends to refer to the Prince as. “Today, I’ll start with pet names to find out which one angers you the most. As for tomorrow…” He pauses to smile at Taehyung. “We shall see what my lovely mind comes up with.”

Taehyung rubs the pulp of his fingers on his pulsating temples. “One day you’ll die by my hands.”

“Sounds delightful.”

“To finish what I was saying,” Taehyung resumes, driving the conversation on the dragonborn, and this time Jungkook looks curious rather than peeved, “if you want to avoid trespassing Seungwon’s territories, don’t cross the bridge at the far north of the house. It's far. Days or weeks away depending on your means of travel, but it’ll lead to his land.”

“Oh... I won’t, thank you.”

Taehyung hesitates on giving more information, fingers drumming on the table. “While dragonborns live as a united community, we’re territorial by nature." He figures that this knowledge isn’t a damning one for Jungkook to know. “We usually don’t mind at all when other dragonborns pass by or live in the lands we own and whatnot, but Seungwon is different. He

resembles humans in the sense that he considers his land as *his* to dictate the residents of, among many other things."

"I've noticed the gates to enter his city."

"Yeah, that. My parents and I have forbidden him from entering Vanae's land but he does anyway from time to time, and there isn't much I can do against it unless I start a civil war."

"So he could potentially come here?"

"Nowhere near this house or my home. If he does, he knows it'll give me the right to challenge him if I want to. There are territories amidst territories, most belonging to a family or dragonborn lineage. If a dragonborn owns a land, they can forbid another dragonborn from entering it. It's very, *very* rare, but it can be done when there's bad blood and if it's taken to the Council."

"Which is what you did with Seungwon, I'm assuming."

"Yeah. He's not allowed to step a foot a certain distance around my home, and it extends to this house now."

Jungkook folds his arms over his knees, resting his cheek on top of them as he gazes outside the bay window. "What would occur if he did?"

"Tearing him apart," Taehyung chuckles at the fantasy. His smile drops moments later. "Is what I'd love to do, but realistically, not much would happen unless he does something highly reprehensible that would warrant his death or a fight. Like destroying my home or hurting a member of my family or someone on my land."

"So, technically, he can still fly above the house."

"Yes, he can."

"That explains why he's here."

" *What?"* Taehyung follows the spot Jungkook is observing in the garden.

He springs to his feet.

"This fucking—"

Taehyung marches to the exit door that he swings open. Once outside, he surveys the sky.

A thunder drifts above the canopy, low enough for Taehyung to recognize the dragon at the head of the group.

Seungwon circles the house and nearby forest. Once. Twice. Three times, his underlings staying afloat. It's at the fourth loop that a roar sounding merry — *thrilled* — booms in the area. Flocks of birds flee from the trees.

Taehyung's arcane howlers at him to get rid of the threat, his nails boring onto the flesh of his arms.

A shoulder bumps against his own.

“Why is he here?” Jungkook shivers, eyes riveted on the thunder.

“Power play. He knows I can’t do shit because he’s in the sky which doesn’t count as a territory."

“I don’t like him being here.”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook. He steps aside. “I know. Me too.”

“Can you maybe throw a fireball at him then pretend you were showing off to me and that he unfortunately was in the way?” Jungkook wonders. Taehyung huffs, the closest thing to a laugh he can emit around the Prince. “Do you think he’ll attack us?”

“No, but he can try.”

“I’m most likely the reason for his visit. He may have wanted to verify I’m here.”

“Probably.” Taehyung refuses to walk back inside until he's assured that Seungwon has left.

“I want to piss him off."

If Taehyung had his spiky tail out, it would wag in enthusiasm. “How would you achieve that?”

Jungkook pivots to face Taehyung’s side, his gaze mischievous. “Do you want to piss him off?”

“Every day,” Taehyung replies without missing a beat, however wary of the Prince’s forming plan.

“He can see us well from here, yes?” Jungkook inquires and Taehyung nods. Jungkook chuckles. His hands find their way around Taehyung’s bicep that they squeeze. “Try not to look surprised or disgusted by my touch, okay?” He wears this meek yet content expression as he presses his chest flush against Taehyung's arm. Jungkook leans near Taehyung who fights back the urge to pull away from Jungkook the more the Prince‘s face crosses the distance. “And follow me inside the house when I tug you,” Jungkook murmurs, his breath skimming Taehyung.

“What are you—”

Then, an event rivaling those old tales of natural catastrophes devastates Taehyung into a state of pure shock.

Jungkook kisses his cheek.

Taehyung’s body locks.

It’s only thanks to Jungkook’s strong grip that he’s moved and, as the Prince had warned, he guides Taehyung inside, his fingers sliding down Taehyung’s arm to cuff the wrist. Taehyung isn’t given time to process what has gone down or to think about being disgusted and *then* not visibly acting as such. Instead, he peers at Jungkook.

There’s a smile curving Jungkook’s lips, the curl suggestive and playful.

Taehyung reflexively kicks the door shut behind them a second later. They make their way deeper, passing by the living room and kitchen. It’s once perched on the stairs leading to the second floor that Jungkook halts. He yanks on Taehyung’s arm to bring him by his side. Taehyung nearly tumbles face first.

A growled roar breaks through the silence, growing quieter until it disappears.

Jungkook cautiously descends the stairs. He crouches at the bottom as he looks toward the garden. Taehyung, after blankly staring at the wall, also comes down. He lays down on his hands to have a view of the sky without being perceived by Seungwon.

Remarkably, Jungkook's devilish plan has worked, and the thunder is gone.

A pleased sound rises next to Taehyung. "As expected."

Taehyung pushes himself on his feet. "You're…"

Jungkook trudges back to his armchair where he plops down, his form swathed by the blankets in a matter of a few seconds. "I think it pissed him off alright. God, this brief outing froze me. It's so cold. Are you cold too, Lovely?" He asks, the serpent withdrawn in the necklace. "You can come out and nap in front of the fireplace if you want. Seungwon is gone and Taehyung won't mind since he's busy imitating a life-like wall."

Taehyung would counter the quip with a retort, but he's disturbed by the prickles on his left cheek, aftermath of Jungkook's foul kiss.

No one pecks Taehyung, — aside from his parents and Jimin when he had been a kid —, which could be quite pathetic in retrospect if Taehyung gave a damn about romantic proclivities and other relational matters. Fortunately, he does not. Unfortunately, his irritation flares when he realizes that the fourth person to have ever kissed him is *a human prince.*

Taehyung swivels around and strides to the kitchen's sink. He turns the faucet on and after squeezing an excessive amount of soap in his palm, he vigorously cleans the place Jungkook's lips laid on.

"You're offensive," Jungkook tuts from the living room.

"Your human germs are offensive."

"I'll be going out with Dahee and Junhyun for the wedding preparations tomorrow. Do you really not want to join?"

"Yes." Taehyung grabs a rag that he uses to dry his face.

Jungkook utters an *'Okay'*.

The house feels suffocating, more than it commonly is, and Seungwon's impromptu visit has worsened Taehyung's agitation.

Deciding to abandon the mess on the coffee table along with the blasted chair for a postponed tidying, Taehyung exits the house. He shifts to his dragon counterpart to scan the woods and check if Seungwon has perhaps left a poisoned gift behind, however the forest is untouched.

Satisfied with his patrol, and deeming the house safe, Taehyung retrieves his carving tools as well as logs of black walnut. He flies to one of his favorite spots in Vanae's forest where he establishes a 'workstation' and he carves there, basking in the tranquil solitude.

Jungkook has been busy. Taehyung has been busy too with, well, not much, in reality, but he *has* been absent from the house.

A week has flown by since the move in, and Taehyung refuses to spend another day without knowing what the parading snake is. Taehyung *needs* to get to the end of the reptile business, and it's with an unwavering determination that he poises himself on The Armchair.

"Sit down and talk," Taehyung commands when Jungkook makes the mistake of walking by the living room one night.

Jungkook startles. "God... How long have you been sitting there?" He asks, because Taehyung has been waiting in the dark living room like some sort of Machiavellian villain.

"Let's cut to the chase." Taehyung flicks a small fireball on the logs stacked in the fireplace.

"I hoped I could avoid this talk for a little longer," Jungkook sighs and settles down in the far corner of the sofa, the flames of the fireplace illuminating him and the rest of the room.

"Fat chance. Now tell me about your snake."

Jungkook elegantly crosses a leg over the other. "As you must have guessed already, my necklace, the ruby, in particular, holds a close friend of mine."

“A close friend of yours."

“Yes, a close friend.”

“Get it out.”

Jungkook’s arms drop to rub his palms on his thighs. “I don’t know if this is a good idea right now.”

Taehyung scoffs. “Try me.”

Jungkook’s evident worry ignites Taehyung’s own concern. Jungkook had stated a couple times that his secrets would be of no harm toward dragonborns, and Taehyung isn’t so convinced anymore.

“Close your eyes,” Jungkook instructs and before Taehyung can voice out a protest, Jungkook continues. “It’s just in case.”

“I've been seeing that snake every day for a week, why would I need to close my eyes now?”

“Because you’ve been and are being particularly abrasive. You threatened me or were threatening to me. Several times.” Jungkook’s tone sharpens. “My friend doesn’t like that, and neither do I. While I can ask her to not hurt you, as I have," he adds, *and isn't that worrisome,* "she has her own free will that I will never repress her from enjoying. So close your eyes, please, and once I deem it safe for you, I’ll tell you.”

“Don’t try anything funny."

“I won’t, I promise.”

Taehyung has no care for worthless promises, but he lets his lids fall shut.

He can’t hear anything for a while, aside from his own breathing and Jungkook’s, or the crackling of his fire and lightning coalescing around his fingers.

“You can come out.”

Taehyung listens, focusing his senses on his surroundings.

A faint hum elevates in the room, as if a curt breeze has erupted and stopped as soon as it has arrived. It’s trailed by rustles of fabrics. The sound is soft and silky, and Taehyung can imagine the snake moving across Jungkook’s limbs.

"Wait. I have to wipe your forehead so he can see it." Jungkook's voice is higher than usual, as it would be if he were speaking to a child. “I know you’re wary of him but…" There's another rustle, trailed by a sound akin to a swipe of a wet cloth on a surface. "A token of trust has to be given, and this is the one we’re granting him like we said, yes?”

A silence stretches out that Taehyung spends wondering if what Jungkook is hiding is a genuine case of insanity.

“We’ll see,” Jungkook chuckles. “It’ll be fine. He’s not like Seohyung or Sungmin.”

Damn right Taehyung isn’t. His fingers drum on the armchair, uncaring about burning patches on the leather.

“You can look.”

Taehyung's eyes fly open.

They meet crimson ones, the black pupils a thin slit at the center. The black scales of the snake undulate, their navy hues shifting when the light of the fireplace brushes against them. There’s a hiss, the sharp fangs and teeth flaunted as the serpent coils around Jungkook’s right arm. It finds a home in his neck that it ascends, the head hovering above Jungkook’s in a makeshift deadly crown.

A phenomenon Taehyung can only describe as survival instincts compels him to avert his eyes from the snake’s and cast his gaze down.

The serpent, which had been mundane aside from the ability to come in and out of the ruby, now emanates an arcane so potent and palpable that it is not only perceptible, but also clogging the air and Taehyung's nose. Taehyung’s own pool of arcane whirs alive in reaction, the intangible arrow of his roulette quivering, both out of a primal fear and an impulsion to oppose the threat.

Because the snake isn’t a meager, basic reptile. Of course not. It would be too easy for Taehyung’s clusterfuck of a life.

It’s a damn *basilisk*, confirmed by the mixed sigil carved on its forehead that had not been there before.

It's the same sigil Taehyung has encountered in the books recounting the tales of the pests basilisks were said to have brought upon humankind and dragonkind alike. Basilisks have always been

considered as a myth: a creature never to exist outside of the legends murmured at night to scare children into obedience. Yet, the one facing Taehyung is tangible.

It's right there , its stare piercing through him.

A violent shudder runs down his spine when his and Jungkook's gaze meet.

"Meet Revna, my friend and, well, guardian of some sort."

"You—" Taehyung's hand grip onto his armchair. "This is a basilisk, right? You have a basilisk pet? Is that a fucking *basilisk?"*

Jungkook smiles with a misplaced levity. "Yes."

"Basilisks are dead. Not even dead. They don't *exist*. They're fictitious tales. They— I'm— How did you even—" Taehyung clamps his mouth shut and bites down on his tongue. He's relieved when pain prickles where his teeth sink, a sign that he isn't dreaming nor has gone mad quite yet.

"At least one is alive and very much real. At first I thought she was a regular snake, or maybe a warlock's former familiar, but after some research I had made about the sigil on her forehead, I found out she held arcanes related to death and venom, among others."

"How the fuck—"

"I won't share with you the how, why and what, but all you have to know is that while her eyes aren't as deadly as they were depicted in the tales, they are still quite… corrosive." Jungkook then *pets the basilisk*. "Her venom, on the other hand, is extremely painful and can be more or less deadly, depending on how venomous she makes her bite. This is why I asked you to close your eyes. She wouldn't have launched at you, but better safe than sorry."

Taehyung's arcane goes haywire where his breath pouch resides in his chest. "Is that all it does?"

"She," Jungkook corrects with a venom that could be literal and *holy fucking shit.*

There's a basilisk in Taehyung's house. Has been for days.

"She. Whatever. Answer me."

"She has a couple additional abilities that I won't speak about as they are personal and related to me, but you know about her offensive 'powers'," Jungkook quotes and he lifts his arms to do so, meaning that the basilisk wrapped around his left one moves with it, the serpent unbothered and seeming too preoccupied with boring an imaginary hole between Taehyung's eyes.

What if said hole becomes real? Jungkook did say the basilisk has a corrosive glare.

"The rest of her arcane is practical for me more than anything else."

"Will I die if I look at her?"

It's received with a laugh. "No, you won't. Unless she wants to hurt you."

Yeah. Because that's reassuring.

So Jungkook, Amaris' Prince, and Taehyung's future betrothed, has somehow gotten his hands on a mythical creature, one that he appears to have domesticated like a mere griffin.

It's complete madness.

Absolute heresy and profoundly manic.

However…

However Taehyung can't smother the swelling curiosity that oscillates underneath the waning alarm and distrust. There's a basilisk in front of him, her tongue peeking out of her muzzle every now and then.

"Can she—" Taehyung loudly clears his throat when his voice cracks on the last syllable like a prepubescent teenager. "Can she speak?"

Jungkook shakes his head. "Not the way you think for people other than me. She expresses herself through noises and, hmm..." He muses, pensively peering at the serpent. "I don't know how to explain, but see it as her having her own language that I can interpret. However she can perfectly understand us."

"So she's not human. She's like a warlock's familiar, and has bonded to you."

"A little, yes. I never thought of it this way," Jungkook says. Taehyung leans forward but he stills when the snake hisses at him. "You're fine. She won't attack."

Taehyung frowns, his hands clasped in front of his mouth.

He mulls over the amount of times he has opposed a threat to Jungkook, whether through his words or actions. When Jungkook could have retaliated — rightfully so, Taehyung begrudgingly adds — and commanded his basilisk to bite or hurt Taehyung, Jungkook had instead chosen to respond with snarky remarks and impudent teasing.

It's bewildering.

"Are your parents aware of her existence?"

"Yes." Jungkook must read the surprise that colors Taehyung's face because he says "They know I have a snake that can come in and out of this ruby, but thanks to Yoongi and Namjoon, we've managed to hide from parents the rest of Revna's abilities and lineage, so to speak."

"So they don't know she's a basilisk? They think she's a simple snake?" Taehyung wonders and Jungkook nods. "You fucking viper." He reflexively says. He subdues when he feels the basilisk's gaze on him. A heat creeps up his neck at a hiss that can easily be read as an offended snip.

Jungkook snickers and pats his snake's head. "The amount of times I've had to hold back my laughter whenever you'd call me this because of how somewhat literal it is. And Revna always takes it to heart and wants to bite you each time."

The irony isn't lost on Taehyung.

"I'd love to see her try. I've never tasted a snake before." Taehyung wouldn't actually eat someone's pet, and Jungkook clearly realizes that because he snorts.

"You'd probably die trying to digest her venom." The basilisk must not like the subject of the discussion because she hisses at Jungkook then nibbles at his wrist. "I'm sorry, Lovely, you know I'd never let it happen."

Taehyung is about to utter a well aimed retort when the basilisk slides down Jungkook's legs. She slithers across the wood planks to pause on the carpet in front of the fireplace. She stays there, unmoving, her head resting on the floor.

Taehyung isn't adept in animal or familiars behavior, but even he can understand a sulking attitude when he sees one.

"Revna, don't pout," Jungkook says while he, himself, is pouting.

Taehyung's eyes don't stray away from the basilisk. He won't growl or prowl like a territorial beast whose domain has been breached, but it's a nearly kind of moment. "If she pisses on my carpet, I'm kicking you *both* out of the house."

"She— She wouldn't do that! She hasn't done that once since we've arrived!"

"How would I know? Does she eat? I've never seen her eat."

"She does eat and she's trained, you idiot. She eats what she hunts in the forest most of the time. Apologize to her."

Taehyung quirks a brow. "No, I won't."

"Apologize."

"I think the fuck not."

Distracted by the argument, Taehyung belatedly notices the basilisk at his feet, the closest she has ever been to him. She creeps up the side of The Armchair. He pulls his arm far from her reach. If he's honest with himself, he's a second away from bolting out entirely.

"You're safe, whether from a bite or a soiled carpet. She's just curious."

Taehyung's gaze darts between Jungkook and the basilisk. He has half a mind to grab the serpent by the neck and fling her away, memories of the acute fangs as fresh in his mind as the venom that had slid down her teeth. However Taehyung is confident that his reflexes will save him from a bite, so he allows this temporarily open window in his defense.

Contrary to the gruesome scenarios that paint Taehyung's vision, the basilisk only stares at him. Her split tongue peeks out of her muzzle and her body rises as she stands taller. Taehyung leans back as much as he can the closer the basilisk's snout moves toward his own nose.

He seizes up when the tongue flicks at his cheek. Lightning rumbles in his chest, pebbling his arms.

"Snakes use their tongue to scent, and that's what she's doing right now. She's scenting you and the air surrounding you," Jungkook explains. "She hasn't been able to up til now since I wanted her to acclimate a little more to the place before properly presenting her to you and your family. Scenting is an important rite of passage for her, because it's how she, how to say… How she evaluates people."

“I’ll shock and burn her to death if she doesn’t back away in the next three seconds.” The cushioned wood of his armchair groans under the pressure of his fingers.

“Revna, come on,” Jungkook chuckles and beckons his ‘friend’.

The basilisk lowers her head. She hisses at Taehyung’s wrist, her tongue brushing on the joint before her snout bumps against it. Taehyung does not budge when the snake nestles her muzzle on the inner side of his wrist. For all he knows, that snake wants to bite his wrist, where the skin is thin and tender, an easy access to his veins.

The basilisk eventually retracts her head and turns around.

She doesn’t give Taehyung another sniff as she crawls down the armchair, her body undulating toward Jungkook. Taehyung vigorously wipes his hand on his pants as he observes the basilisk drape around Jungkook’s shoulders.

The basilisk makes a series of noises, vocalizations between hisses and clicks of a tongue.

“What is it?” The basilisk ‘speaks’ some more. “Aah, really now? Why?”

“What? What is she saying?”

“She’s been as distrustful of you as you are of her and I, but now she’s telling me that she likes you?”

Taehyung can’t contain the — offended? Shocked? *Content?! — ‘Huh?’* that escapes his mouth.

“Yeah, I don’t know why either because you’re quite despicable.”

“Fuck you.”

Jungkook snickers. He caresses the basilisk’s lithe end of the tail, a smile floating on his lips. “Would you be comfortable with her being out and about? And I mean properly, not just curled up in her ruby or in front of the fireplace.”

“You want— You want to let a basilisk roam the house? *A deadly basilisk?* What if she kills someone?”

“She won’t unless I’m in real danger,” Jungkook says with exasperation. “She listens to me. If I ask her to not attack, she won’t.”

“My parents and Jimin will see her if she’s let out."

“I know, and I don’t mind. I don’t want her to live recluse in the ruby when she should be free to wander as she pleases. This is why I want to tell your family next, so that it’s out of the way.”

"She can go anywhere except my bedroom. If I accidentally squash her to death, don't blame me for it."

"Really?"

Taehyung nods. He might regret this decision when he’s poisoned to death one day, but he doesn’t mind the basilisk all that much in the end — even less if he gets to study her from a distance and

satiate his inquisitive mind. As long as she does not try to approach him, all will be fine, a rule that he tells Jungkook.

“You heard that?” Jungkook peers at the basilisk. The latter surveys Taehyung before turning her head to the side in a gesture Taehyung can read as a petulant agreement, having seen the same be enacted by the Prince.

“Did she just *sass* me?”

Jungkook erupts into a series of chirpy laughter, his cheeks bunching up around a grin. “She sure did. She agrees though, don’t worry.”

Taehyung rises on his feet. “We’ll visit my parents’ home first thing in the morning. I’m heading to bed because I’m done with whatever all of this was."

"Goodnight, and thank you for allowing her inside and being patient about her."

"I have a feeling you would have let her wander how she pleases whether I had accepted or not." Another reason why he had agreed. He'd rather not argue more than necessary, and hell knows he will do his damnedest to spend as little time inside the house as possible anyway.

"I definitely would have," Jungkook confirms with a cheeky smile.

"Fucking brat."

Taehyung climbs the stairs two by two. He feels a bit silly when once on the second floor, he grabs a towel that he rolls and tucks under the space between his bedroom’s door and the ground. Realistically, the basilisk that is the size of a boa wouldn’t fit under the doorstep, but Taehyung needs a more tangible sense of safety.

A few minutes later, he plops down face first on his bed as he mulls over the newly introduced inhabitant of the house. His thoughts trace back on all that has been said and hinted at.

With the way Jungkook has responded to some of Taehyung's questions, it confirms to Taehyung that the Prince is hiding another secret.

A more damning one.

The Prince is a Jeon, after all, and no sensible dragonborn would ever trust this cruel dynasty.

“Oh, isn’t she the cutest!”

“I love snakes! She’s so cool and pretty.”

“Her scales are absolutely gorgeous. Their navy, iridescent hue is one I have rarely seen.”

“Can I hold her? Pretty please?”

“She said yes, go ahead.”

Taehyung, gawking at the group, surveys the exchange as Jimin lifts the basilisk from Jungkook’s arms. “Have you all gone mad?”

“What is it, Son?”

“There’s a basilisk in the house,” Taehyung exclaims. “A basilisk!”

“Perhaps, but it is an adorable one.” Junhyun nods to himself as he kindly gazes at the deadly creature. “From what Jungkook has told us, basilisks were depicted as more cruel than what they truly are. We have a lot in common with them, don't you think?”

“Right?” Jungkook enthusiastically agrees. “I was surprised when I realized that the sigil on her head meant that she is a basilisk.”

“Woow,” Jimin breathes out. “Her scales are so soft.”

“She likes it when you scratch the base of her neck,” Jungkook says. “She’s very social. You’re more than welcome to pet her.”

“Here?” The basilisk is curled around Jimin’s arms and he frees one of them to do as Jungkook instructs, itching his fingers on a spot behind the snake’s neck. The snake hisses and nudges Jimin’s fingers. “She’s so cute... Can we share custody?”

Taehyung is left to wonder if the basilisk has cast a hypnotizing spell that has put Taehyung’s family into a trance of revolting gushing.

“Son, you look a second away from passing out,” Dahee teases from where she’s perched on the dining table.

“Because I am. You’re demented. Not one of you is questioning the presence of a damn basilisk in our kitchen."

“Silly boy.” Dahee walks toward Taehyung, the two at the far back of the room. “You’re too wary for your own well-being.”

“Am I? He's the heir of the Jeon dynasty, the one that had instigated the Great War. My apologies if I'm a tad distrustful,” Taehyung snips, and Jungkook rolls his eyes when Taehyung glances at him. "He *was* hiding something. He still is. Something's strange about him and you noticed too."

“Just like we are. We’re not so different from him."

“Taehyung, do you want to hold her?” Jimin brightly grins.

“Absolutely not.” Taehyung steps backward when Jimin advances toward him, armed with the basilisk. “Get away from me with that damn reptile.”

“Stop being so insulting,” Jungkook mutters and retrieves the basilisk from Jimin. “She’s nice, and she likes you.”

“She does?” Jimin emits a theatrical gasp, a hand on his chest. “Strange.”

Taehyung's glare shifts on Jimin before snapping on an approaching Jungkook.

"You can hold and pet her," Jungkook proposes once a couple feet away from Taehyung. "As you've seen with Jimin, she's very cuddly."

"I'm not doing either of those things and I swear on my tiny sculptures of fox cubs that I *will* flatten this place and everyone in it if you don't stay away from me."

"She wants you to pet her," Jungkook insists.

"I don't care." Taehyung is backed up against the wall, judging his escape routes.

"She won't hurt you, I promise. Token?" Then, Jungkook has the audacity to lift his pinky finger like a child making a promise to not eat all of the cookies in the glass jar. "Taehyung?"

Taehyung stares at Jungkook, at the Prince who has given Taehyung perhaps his most precious token, if the way Jungkook is cradling the basilisk against his chest is any given.

Taehyung groans for good measure.

He then sighs, dramatically drawn out.

"I'm doing this once. *One time*. After that, do not *ever* ask me to touch her again. Got it?"

Jungkook presses his lips together, doing nothing to conceal his smile. "Mhm, got it."

Taehyung uncrosses one of his arms. His right hand moves closer to the basilisk's head. Everyone is watching them; Jimin and Dahee whispering to each other while Junhyun sips on his cup of tea.

Taehyung's digits ball up into a fist so tight that it trembles. Not that the tremors are due to any sort of trepidation and excitement, of course. His index is pointing at the basilisk, an inch away from her. It touches a scale on the crown.

He *pokes* a basilisk, and what if she lunges to bite his neck? Oh but her scales *are* soft, like watery silk.

"There." Taehyung promptly retracts his arm. The snake is staring up at him, the eyes round and *by the Elders*. He must have lost his mind as well to think about sculpting a miniature version of the basilisk. "I did it. Now leave me al—"

Taehyung goes Ô so very still when a wet object that turns out to be a tongue glides on his forearm. His gaze jumps down. Before he can get a single word out of his mouth or break the wall behind him to escape, the basilisk's head slides across the back of his hand. It slithers up his elbow and bicep. His throat wrenches around an aborted sound that is *not* a whine the more he feels the rippling body creep up his arm.

"Do you want me to take her away?" Jungkook asks, holding half of the basilisk's body, the other half coiled around Taehyung's bicep.

"Is he breathing?" Jimin says.

Taehyung isn't certain himself.

He can feel the silky scales brush upon the skin of his neck, the collar of his shirt bunching up when the basilisk curves toward the front in a makeshift fatal scarf. A pair of eyes greet him a second later as the snake faces him. The tongue darts out every few seconds, and Taehyung can only stare in unadulterated dread.

And awe.

The eyes are redder than Taehyung had realized, two pools of rich crimson peering back at him. The raven scales shine under the sunlight, contrasting with the white sigil drawn on the forehead. Taehyung has a lot of questions to ask, starting with why Jungkook has let go of the basilisk, but they're all erased from his thoughts by an unprecedented disaster.

The basilisk bumps her snout against his nose.

“Oh,” Jungkook breathes out.

“W—What? *What?* Why did she do that? Did she poison me?” Taehyung doubts a nose boop can be venomous, but rationality escapes him.

“Oh no, not at all. She really, really, and I mean *really* likes you.”

“How odd,” Dahee, Junhyun and Jimin all say in unison.

The group erupts into a boisterous burst of hilarity.

“There’s nothing funny about a basilisk trying to strangle me!” The snake has contorted twice around Taehyung's throat by now, the cold scales freezing him. He goes through his arcane, settling on the fire aspect to warm himself up. His gaze meets Jungkook’s.

The Prince looks happy, his head tilted to the side, and his eyes are fond as he peers at the basilisk and Taehyung. Not that Taehyung believes that the fondness is aimed at him.

Jungkook crosses the distance, sending a waft of this grim flowery scent of his in Taehyung’s direction, the bleak aspect most likely due to the basilisk now that Taehyung thinks about it. The Prince places a hand at the back of the basilisk’s head, scratching his fingers at the curve of her neck. His movements are careful as he pets the serpent, never accidentally touching Taehyung’s nape.

“She’s looking for warmth,” Jungkook softly says, breaking through the silence that had wrapped around them. “You’re warm. You always are,” he adds, and memories of Jungkook shuffling near Taehyung when outside pop into Taehyung's mind, “and she definitely enjoys it right now.”

“Huh,” Taehyung eloquently says.

“Revna. Come on, Lovely, you can sleep in front of the fireplace if you want.” When Jungkook tries to tug the basilisk away from Taehyung, the limbless body tightens around Taehyung’s neck. “Revna.”

“She’s not letting go.”

Jungkook sighs. “As I mentioned, she’s a bit of a brat.”

“Color me surprised. She’s *your* basilisk after all."

“I’m not a brat,” Jungkook contests exactly like one would. “Revna,” he resumes, “I’ll get you a blanket as well.” The basilisk hisses, her tongue tickling Taehyung’s cheek, but she finally relents. She extends her head toward Jungkook who lifts her from Taehyung’s shoulders. “Being so difficult for the first time he holds you doesn’t bold well for any future petting, you know.”

“You make it sound like I’ll ever get near her again, which I won’t.” Taehyung crouches then ducks his head and once freed, he jerks back. “Fucking hell. Isn’t she supposed to be wary of me?”

“She was because she couldn’t scent you until last night.” Jungkook nuzzles the basilisk’s crown then places a kiss there, a counterproductive gesture to the reprimand he had uttered seconds ago. “She has a great flair. It might be a hidden ability of hers, but she’s a really good judge of character and has exceptional instincts, a bit like me. Her and I have deemed you worthy to earn our trust.”

“What an honor. Gonna bask in it away from you both.” Taehyung marches to a sofa in the living room that he drops on.

“Oh to be a little mouse spying on the two of you every day,” Jimin forlornly sighs, already seated on the other couch along with Dahee and Junhyun.

“Come join us,” Dahee offers to Jungkook who obeys, finding a spot on the vacant armchair. “We need to speak about a few matters.” Snacks are laid on the coffee table and Taehyung grabs one of the pastries his father has baked. “The preparations for the wedding are going well. The invitations have been sent. There will be a few more visits to Amaris, including one where you will need to be present, Taehyung.”

“Alright.” Taehyung can handle one meet-up with the Queen and King.

“The ceremony will mingle humans and dragonborns traditions both. I’ll explain it in more detail later on."

“It’ll be spectacularly beautiful,” Junhyun grins.

“It certainly will,” Dahee smiles and pats her mate’s thigh. It fades seconds later, replaced by furrowed brows and a gentle gaze that she settles on Jungkook. “On a more serious note, thank you for trusting us with Revna, Jungkook."

"Of course. I intended to present her to you as soon as possible." Jungkook has a blanket covering his legs, the basilisk forming a heap underneath. "As I've told you, my parents are not aware of the countenance of her arcane, and I would like for it to remain as such."

"This goes without saying. Only your friends and us are aware she can manipulate the Arcane?" Junhyun inquires and Jungkook nods. "Your secret is safe with us."

A forgotten matter flickers in Taehyung’s head. “Are your two friends coming to Vanae soon?”

“Yes! They’ll be moving into a house not too far from ours after the ceremony,” Jungkook grins. “I can’t wait. I miss them a lot.”

“The warlock too?”

“It won’t be anything official for Yoongi. But he’ll warn the Queen that he has some business to attend overseas, which isn’t entirely false. He’ll simply forget to mention that it has to do with

dragonborns.”

“Ehh. I’ve never met a warlock.” Jimin leans toward Jungkook, and he's sporting this look of interest on his face. Taehyung’s eyes narrow. “How’s your warlock friend? Is he nice?”

“He is, but he’s a little aloof at first,” Jungkook answers. “He’ll warm up though, don’t worry.”

“Reminds me of someone.” Jimin gives Taehyung a snide glance.

Taehyung flips him off.

“Now,” Dahee interjects, “if there isn’t anything else important to mention, I would like to discuss the wedding.”

As Dahee and Jungkook launch themselves into thorough explanations of the ceremony’s different steps, Taehyung zones out, surveying Jungkook and the basilisk cuddling in the armchair.

Chapter End Notes

I promise Taehyung will (eventually) warm up to Jungkook, he just needs some time and to realize that Jungkook isn't an Harbinger of Doomed D o o m TM. As you've noticed, Taehyung has trust issues the size of the galaxies in Jungkook's eyes 🫶 Hope you enjoyed this chapter though and as always comments are very much loved hehe 🤍

❧ Twitter

— House's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH4.

Yes I made floor plans because I'm a visual person and need visuals okay whataboutit /lh

Also Taehyung's workshop/inside garden and Jungkook's library/reading nook aren't constructed yet, that happens much later in the story. Those visuals don't exactly depict how Taekook's house is, but it gives a great general idea of how it looks and the mood of it!!

Taekook's house, 1st floor
Taekook's house, 2nd floor
Interior I
Interior II
Interior III (this is what a lot of the house's 'walls' look like)
Fireplace
Solarium

— Character's visuals —

Revna
Revna's size

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art about Jungkook and Revna made by taeoceans
❧ A magazine about Amaris made by yooniedumplin
❧ A magazine about Vanae made by yooniedumplin

Chapter 5: Inks' Fallout

Chapter Summary

The two betrothed meet with Vanae's (in)famous bespoke tailor, and Taehyung obtains a strange book.

Chapter Notes

!!Please read!!

There's some sort of 'editing' throughout this chapter so if possible keep the 'Creator's Style' option enabled so you can see it. It's okay if you don't it won't bother the comprehension of what's happening 🤍

Cw

1) brief mentions and references to physical abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the past eleven days, Taehyung has been dutifully maintaining his ignorance of the Prince and the basilisk. He’s doing quite well, all things considered. Jungkook has taken the hint and surrendered his attempts at launching any trivial chit-chats with Taehyung.

Taehyung’s good spirit can also be explained by the fact that Jungkook has been spending a lot of time out of the house, the Prince and Taehyung’s parents occupied by the wedding’s arrangements. So, whenever Jungkook comes back from his trip, Taehyung is the one to vacate the place, their interactions limited to fleeting, one-sided greetings in the morning.

Taehyung has been practically living like a stray cat, one that only enters its house to nap or devour a fare.

Or spy on Jungkook, because the latter cultivates his nightly routine like a well oiled clock.

Taehyung had thought Jungkook had acclimated pretty well to the life at Vanae, so he can’t fathom why Jungkook would need to go out every night for a teary catharsis — if it is what Jungkook does.

So, as he had promised to himself, Taehyung has initiated his investigation anew.

Since Monday, Taehyung stalks after Jungkook whenever the Prince exits the house for his midnight walk. He keeps a greater distance between them during his trailing, ensuring that Jungkook can’t somehow hear or sense Taehyung’s presence. Jungkook always haphazardly pauses

at some point to sit on a tree stump, rock or cold grass. The basilisk doesn't leave the ruby much when outside of the residence.

There isn’t any recurring element to the brief journeys aside from their daily existence at night. They seem useless, for lack of a better word.

But there has to be a reason, right?

Yesterday, Taehyung had even employed his hunting methods and had gone against the wind when he had followed Jungkook, in case Jungkook or the basilisk had caught Taehyung before and that *this* had been why the outings had been so damn worthless. Still nothing.

Today is Wednesday.

Jungkook is seated at the dinner table, opposite of Taehyung, however a couple chairs down to Taehyung’s right. Taehyung used to exclusively eat in his bedroom, but it had quickly become tedious with the constant back and forth between bringing his plate and cutlery or retrieving a forgotten seasoning.

The basilisk is, as she often does, sprawled in front of the fireplace, her long body loosely curled above the comfortable cushion she tends to spend her days on. Taehyung doesn't know if snakes — or basilisks in particular — are the kind of animals to hibernate during winter, but with the amount of sleeping and napping and *more sleeping* the basilisk does, Taehyung is inclined to believe so.

Nevertheless, the wedding is planned for a few weeks later, and Taehyung supposes this is as good a time as any to confront Jungkook.

“Where is it that you go every night lately, and why?”

Jungkook’s eyes move from his finished meal to fixate Taehyung. “Hm?”

“You leave the house every single night. What could you possibly be doing in the forest?”

“For someone who mentions at each breath that he does not care about me, you sure ask a lot of questions."

“Because this human stranger, heir to the Jeon dynasty, invaded my house and is doing hell knows what in my forest." Taehyung discards Jungkook’s comment about territorial dragonborns that follows his accusation. “That doesn’t inspire trust.”

“I’m going out. That’s all."

“Yeah, try that again.”

“I’m exploring the forest."

“Is it about the primordial stone?”

“Yes and no?” Jungkook vaguely answers. “I *am* just exploring, but if I stumble on something that could help me elucidate the mystery surrounding the stone, then…” He shrugs.

“And what, pray tell, could you ever find in a deserted forest that would be useful for your investigation?”

“The forest isn’t deserted at all. Plus it seems arcanic, unlike Amaris'."

“My family and I are the only ones living nearby. Are you meeting up with someone?” It would partially make sense, however it wouldn't explain why Taehyung has never caught any foreign scent in the forest’s outskirts. “Are you?”

Jungkook rises to his feet as he gathers his plate, strands of hair brushes across his irked gaze. “You remind me of Seungwon in that aspect. Demanding. Controlling.”

“I’m not controlling. If I was, I wouldn't allow you to flee at night, yet I’m not holding you back, am I?”

“‘Controlling’ was a poor choice of word, sure,” Jungkook chuckles without any mirth. “Maybe ‘unpleasantly forceful and inquisitive’ fits better how you’ve been.I remember you urging me to extend an indifference toward you, which I have, and I’d appreciate it if you'd pursue your own requests. I can do what I desire with my days, or nights. Whether I am meeting a friend or not is absolutely none of your concern.”

“I’m having issues with a human wandering off in Vanae’s forest every night.” For all Taehyung knows, Jungkook could have lied at the dinner with Taehyung’s family and could be working with Amaris’ rulers to wound Taehyung's family from the inside. The basilisk could be the first step, and Taehyung feels recklessly foolish to have ever allowed its presence in the house.

“I can assure you that I’m not conspiring any doom like you seem to be so convinced of. I don’t have you, your family or dragonborns in my line of sight.” With his back to Taehyung, Jungkook begins to wash his dishes. “We both have a common goal.” He twists his head to meet Taehyung’s eyes. “Unearthing what ploy *my parents* are hatching.”

Nothing about Jungkook’s words sits right with Taehyung. There *has* to be a reason behind his nightly departures, and Taehyung promises himself to figure out what it is even if he has to ultimately tear the answers from Jungkook’s mouth.

The few participation Taehyung had offered to the wedding had regarded his apparel for the ceremony, along with the design of his headpieces and ceremonial present for Jungkook, as human traditions oblige. He and Jungkook had ordered their garments from a well-renowned bespoke tailor in Vanae’s central town, while Taehyung had tasked Jimin with the creation of the headpieces.

Taehyung is torn out from his meandering thoughts by a chirpy exclamation.

“If it isn’t the future and beloved husbands! Come in, come in! We've closed shop today for you both,” Seokjin announces.

He ushers Taehyung and Jungkook inside, the bell ringing when the door is locked shut.

Taehyung hasn’t frequented the shop in a while, and he contemplates the entrance as he’s led to a large room where a podium is planted at the center, a wide mirror attached on the wall facing it.

Taehyung searches for the tailor's assistant and when he doesn't see him he says "Hoseok isn't—"

"Jin! You *owe* me! You better give me a raise 'cause I'm not being paid enough for this," Hoseok yells from a room at the back, his voice growing clearer as he enters the fitting room. "Do you have any idea of how much I had to bargain with that fishy— The newlyweds!" He grins at Taehyung and Jungkook. "How has it been, huh? I've heard that—"

"We're not married yet," Taehyung gruffly says, but the pretense at annoyance falls flat with the smile that stretches his lips when Hoseok tugs him into a hug and oats his back.

"Don't be such a sourpuss," Hoseok says before pushing Taehyung aside to greet Jungkook with a formal bow. "A pleasure to meet you, Prince of Amaris. Now…" He pivots to face Seokjin. "Give me a raise."

"You've found what I wanted?" Seokjin gasps.

"Yes. For a price. That you'll pay back," Hoseok states with a finger that he digs in Seokjin's chest.

"Yes, yes," Seokjin waves off to admire the roll of silky fabric that he delicately feels between his fingers. "This is marvelous. Absolutely marvelous. Make yourself useful and stash this in our storage room, will you?" He adds, handing the roll back to Hoseok. "You both." Seokjin claps his hands once. "Which one shall I start with?"

Taehyung throws a thumb in Jungkook's direction.

"Me, I suppose," Jungkook chuckles.

"Allow me to show you the suit first," Seokjin says, a hand between the Prince's shoulders to guide him toward the podium. "It is splendid. You'll love it."

"I have no doubt I will."

Taehyung waits until the two blabber-mouths are out of earshot and view to make his way toward the front desk where Hoseok is hunched over, scribbling astronomical numbers on a paper. "Hey. Hoseok."

Hoseok looks up. "Yup?"

"You still visit Eden, right?"

Hoseok squints as he pinches his quill between his thumbs and indexes to carefully place it down. "Yes, my Lord, I do. I came back from it today, actually. Why?"

"There's an object or spell I'd like to acquire, but I obviously can't go there myself."

Hoseok's mouth opens around a drawn out *'Oh.'* He leans closer to Taehyung right as the latter does, his eyes positively shining with curiosity. "Tell me."

"I don't know if it exists, or if it could be made, but do you think you'd be able to find an object that can detect arcane? All kinds of arcane. Whether belonging to a dragonborn or warlock, ancient or not."

Hoseok grabs a root of licorice from Elders know where and tucks it between his teeth. “What’s this about? Sounds fun.”

“I want to clarify an issue,” Taehyung opts to say. He likes Hoseok, having aided him in the past and vice versa, but he’s not certain of how much of his distrust for Jungkook he should share with the dragonborn.

“I know a warlock.”

“You know an everything,” Taehyung snorts.

“Damn right I do,” Hoseok affirms with a cocky smile. “I can get you and them in contact, potentially.”

“Them?”

“I don’t know their gender. We’ve never spoken face to face and I’ve never met them.”

“And you work with them?”

“They get done whatever job I need to be done and it's all that matters to me. I don’t ask questions and never should you when it concerns… underground activities.”

“Can you get me in touch with them? I’d rather not have anyone know that I’m involved with the black market,” Taehyung mumbles. It wouldn’t look good for Vanae’s future leader, plus he refuses to step foot there again, even if willingly this time.

“They might have some questions to ask you though.” Hoseok munches on his root of licorice. “They have this sort of special book they use to speak with their customers."

“Could I borrow it?”

“Sure. I need to ask them first. The warlock’s a stickler for rules. If they agree, I’ll trust you with the book but don’t lose it or damage it, otherwise I won't have any other means to contact them.”

“Yeah of course. Thank you," Taehyung says, eager to elucidate the mystery encapsulating Jungkook.

“On one condition.”

Taehyung internally sighs.

It had been too easy.

“Listening...”

“Fifty lapis and I’ll lend you the book for two weeks.”

“Fifty lapis?! That’s nearly three thousand coins!”

“It’s a precious book,” Hoseok counters and folds his arms behind his head. “I don’t do charity work. If you can’t pay, then our deal is off.”

Taehyung glares at him. “Thirty lapis and two weeks.”

“Forty-five lapis. Two weeks.”

“Thirty-five, two weeks, and I'll tell you what it’s about.”

“Deal!”

“Fucking noisy thief."

Hoseok waits, head supported between his hands. “Tell me now.”

Taehyung glances behind. Seokjin and Jungkook are conversing about the suit, not a sliver of attention given to Taehyung and Hoseok. “The Prince bothers me.”

“Uh? Really? He’s been nice though?”

“Don’t let it fool you,” Taehyung scoffs. “Something is up with him and I want to know what. Call it instincts plus the fact that he confirmed himself to have a secret.”

“We all have secrets,” Hoseok reasons, but Taehyung can’t relate to it when Jungkook is at the core of his wariness. “Are you sure you’re not being paranoid?”

“It’d be paranoia if it wasn’t justified.”

“I’ll never understand your hatred for humans. It’s gotten a bit crazed and irrational for the past few years, Taehyung. They’re not nearly as bad as you make them seem to be at all and—”

“When can you get me that book?” Taehyung interrupts, more snippy than intended.

“I’ll ask the warlock first. When and if they agree, I’ll lend you the book. You owe me one.”

“I’m paying for this so I’m not owing you anything,” Taehyung rebuts, aware of Hoseok’s tendencies to never forget a debt.

“Still a little shit, huh?” Hoseok chastises with a flick on Taehyung’s forehead.

Taehyung smacks the hand away. “This little shit got you out of jail *several times*. Speaking of, if anything, you’re the one who owes me.”

“Aaand this is my cue to go! I’ll be right back,” Hoseok whispers in a conspiratorial voice as he wiggles finger guns at Taehyung and walks backward. “Gonna wrap your pretty present and I don’t mean your betrothed.”

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “Can you fuck off already."

Hoseok does as he fades behind a door. Taehyung stays where he is, listening in on the excited, mundane chat, his back to the fitting room.

“Isn't Jungkook charming?” Seokjin shouts.

“As much as a damn pebble,” Taehyung shoots back.

“Taehyung, be kind to your betrothed."

“I don't think this minuscule, bitter brain of his understands what kindness is,” Jungkook retorts. Seokjin’s windshield wiper laugh erupts in the shop while Taehyung’s face etches around a scowl. “Fucking viper,” Jungkook says in this atrocious imitation.

Taehyung should be more offended, but he's taken aback by the Prince swearing, and so he makes his way to the fitting room. “Did you curse?”

“Only to mock you,” Jungkook confirms. “Otherwise I don’t like swearing. It’s vulgar.”

“Well shit, that’s fucking unfortunate.” Taehyung internally snickers at the moue that purses Jungkook’s lips.

Taehyung slouches on a loveseat facing the round platform, however opposite of the mirror. He slumps down the sofa as his legs spread, an arm resting on the armrest to cushion his cheek with the back of his hand, and he slowly closes his eyes.

“Now,” Seokjin begins a few minutes later, tearing Taehyung out of his impromptu nap. “Would you mind stepping out of your current clothes? There’s a changing room at the back if needed.”

“Oh it’s no trouble.” Jungkook lays his cup of tea on the tray brimming with baked goods before climbing on the podium. He undresses, soon left in nothing but his underwear, socks and jewelry.

Taehyung doesn’t mean to stare but he does anyway.

Jungkook is well-built, with muscular thighs and strong shoulders. His figure is athletic yet softened in some assets that Taehyung promptly flutters his gaze away from as it flies upward. Another, more peculiar trait draws Taehyung’s attention instead.

It’s the scars peppering Jungkook’s skin.

There aren’t many, most of them thin, light beige lines. However a few of them are more prominent than the rest: jagged and rougher, of a pink hue where they slash the waist and hip. A third one is on the back of Jungkook’s left arm, this scar more round and brown — the result of a cigar burns, Taehyung realizes.

It has Taehyung speculating about who the instigator of each mark is. He doubts Jungkook’s parents would allow traces of their ‘discipline’ to show that would be seen by the maids and others. It must not be the basilisk either who has shown a resolute protectiveness for the Prince. So it only leaves one suspect, unless Jungkook has concealed the existence of more perpetrators.

Taehyung’s gaze locks with Jungkook’s in the mirror.

Jungkook is the one to avert his own seconds later.

“Taehyung, can you step away?” Seokjin says, his eyes shifting between the two betrothed. “It’d be bad luck to see Jungkook in his suit before the ceremony.”

The wedding is bad luck alright already, but Taehyung complies without protests. He stands and walks to the shop’s entrance to settle at the front desk. Seokjin fiddles with the curtain hooked against the wall, and after winking at Taehyung, he tugs the drape over the archway, effectively negating any attempt at snooping.

Less than twenty minutes elapse between the minimal adjustments to Jungkook's suit and Taehyung taking his place on the podium.

“Let us work fast, sour boy,” Seokjin quips and gathers his needed tools.

Taehyung clicks his tongue, unwillingly justifying the sobriquet by frowning. He peers in the mirror and catches the top of a head snooping from behind the curtain, a pair of enrapt eyes pinned on him. “ *Viper.* ”

The curtain jostles in Jungkook’s grip. “Yes?”

Taehyung catches a glimpse of a snake's head peeking out of the collar of the bear fur coat Jungkook is wearing. “What are you looking at?”

“You,” Jungkook says. The basilisk's tongue darts out, craning her neck to seemingly have a better look.

Taehyung's head twists to glower at Jungkook. “Don’t.”

“I’m not allowed to look at my betrothed?”

“I’m not your anything, so st—” A needle pokes Taehyung’s rear.

“Get your suit, you know where the changing room is. And you,” Seokjin points an admonishing finger at Jungkook, the basilisk gone. “Stop snooping if you don’t want to curse your wedding.”

“The wedding is already cursed,” Taehyung and Jungkook both say at the same time, muttered for one and caricatural for the other.

“You’re so predictable,” Jungkook snickers and sashays away, the curtain swaying in his departure.

Taehyung pinches the bridge of his nose. “I will fucking kill him.”

“Remember that you can’t kill me!” Jungkook pipes up.

Seokjin's hilarity is schooled into a neutral nonchalance when Taehyung's glare drifts on him.

Taehyung strides to the changing room and yanks the curtain close. His suit awaits him inside and he doesn’t spend much time reviewing it, preferring to also expedite today’s fittings. He can take a better look at his outfit during the wedding.

When he walks out, the process is similar to Jungkook’s, Seokjin pinning the fabric here and there in some places.

“So.” Seokjin starts. “How has life been with Amaris’ Prince?”

“Horrifying.”

Seokjin laughs at Taehyung’s dramatics as he crouches next to him. “He’s nice, and you should be as well.”

“So has everyone said. Good thing I’ll do as damn well please.”

“You’re still as insolent as ever.”

“Won't change a winning team."

Seokjin works in silence for some time, Taehyung mulling over what could be the subject of his next wood carving project.

“Hoseok was absent at the time, but I remember what happened back then, Taehyung,” Seokjin says, his grievous timber ripping through the serenity. Taehyung’s muscles tense, both out of humiliation and ire. “The enmity you nurse for humans is comprehensible and warranted, but Jungkook deserves less… antagonizing. It’s easy to see that his kindness is genuine, even if you suppose that he hides something.”

“How do you— *Hoseok* ,” Taehyung sighs.

“Him and I come as a package deal,” Seokjin grins and lays his tools on an elegant mahogany trolley. “Nevertheless, I’ve said it in the past, but if you ever need help with anything, our door is always open.”

Taehyung deflates. He uncrosses his arms when Seokjin motions him to. “Thank you. I’m sorry for my… My moodiness. I’m just…”

“Temperamental, as per usual.” Seokjin chases away the apology with a wave of his hand. “There’s a problem I wanted to touch on with you."

Taehyung listens, thankful for the steer in the discussion.

“Fuck,” Taehyung curses as he steps out of the tailoring shop, his and Jungkook's arms burdened with a suit enveloped in black garment bags.

“Yes, I agree. Do you like your suit?”

“Come on.” Taehyung nods to the side, him and Jungkook strolling down the streets.

“I love mine, if that wasn’t obvious. Apparently they made it so we match together.”

“Of course they did,” Taehyung mumbles.

“Where are we going?” Jungkook inquires minutes later when they take a turn leading them to the city’s bustling center place.

“Jeweler for my headpiece and your ring.” Taehyung stops in front of the boutique. He drapes his protected suits over Jungkook’s arms but keeps with himself the book Hoseok had given him before they'd left. “Wait here.”

“You got my ring done?” Jungkook exclaims, a tad too noisily for Taehyung’s liking.

It’s not as though Taehyung could show up to the wedding without one. “Yes?”

“I didn’t expect you to.”

“Me either."

Jungkook bursts into laughter, to Taehyung’s confusion.

Later that night, Taehyung descends the stairs and enters the kitchen, the arcanic book in his hand. He’s about to toss a paper bag in the bin when Jungkook speaks.

“Where did you get that?”

Taehyung’s gaze slowly stirs on the Prince who’s fixing the book. “A friend of mine gave it to me. Why?”

Jungkook stares, a blink breaking through. He throws the comforter from his legs and reaches Taehyung’s sides in hurried steps. Taehyung does not even shun the Prince when the latter unceremoniously steals the book from Taehyung’s hand. He’d rather study this newfound bizarre reaction.

Jungkook squints at the front cover, then at the spine that he traces with the pulp of his fingers. He emerges out of his trance after examining the back cover. “Oh. Never mind. It looks similar to a rare edition of one of my favorite books. I loved the story in it, it was unexpected in various ways.”

Bullshit.

“What is the story about?”

“A man who eats hearts to survive.”

This is also bullshit, but Taehyung has to question how Jungkook has managed to instantaneously formulate such a gruesome idea. “My book isn’t about that.”

“Is this what Hoseok gave you?”

“Yes."

They’re testing each other, Taehyung recognizes.

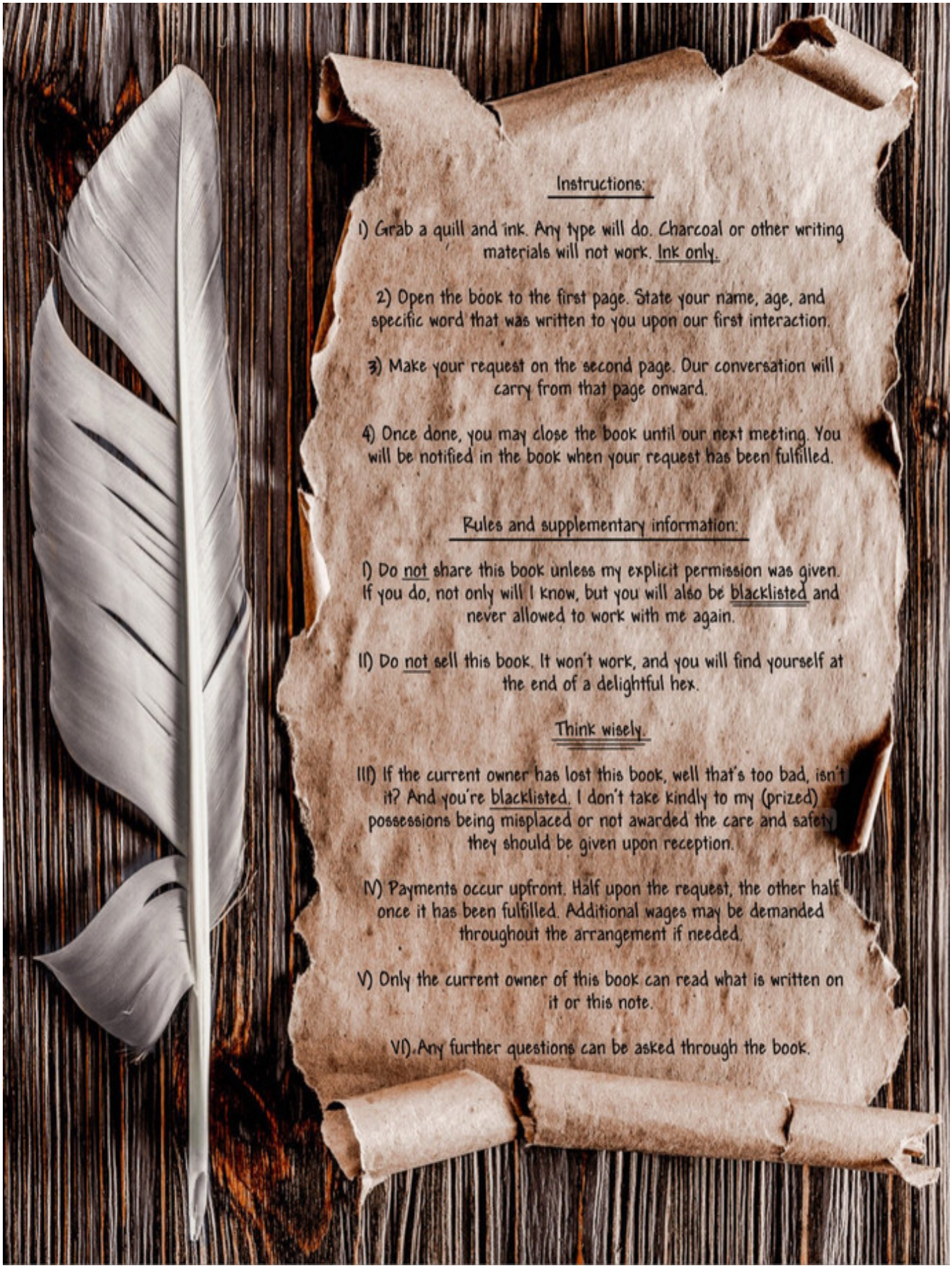
Taehyung by entertaining Jungkook’s inquisitiveness, and Jungkook through his questions, and Taehyung can tell Jungkook finds it strange to hear them being answered when Taehyung would usually reject the curiosity.

Jungkook hums, then, without any other remarks, he sinks into his armchair and heap of comforters.

Taehyung lets the oddity fly for now to walk up the stairs and lock himself in his bedroom. The curtains are tugged shut, the moonlight seeping through the fabric and casting a light blue glow in

the room. An oil lamp is lightened on the nightstand framing the bed, giving enough luminosity for Taehyung to inspect the book.

He’s sitting crossed legs against the bed’s headboard, the book ominously resting at his feet. He reads the instructions written on the note laid next to his quill.


Instructions:
1) Grab a quill and ink. Any type will do. Charcoal or other writing materials will not work. Ink only.
2) Open the book to the first page. State your name, age, and specific word that was written to you upon our first interaction.
3) Make your request on the second page. Our conversation will carry from that page onward.
4) Once done, you may close the book until our next meeting. You will be notified in the book when your request has been fulfilled.
Rules and supplementary information:
I) Do not share this book unless my explicit permission was given. If you do, not only will I know, but you will also be blacklisted and never allowed to work with me again.
II) Do not sell this book. It won't work, and you will find yourself at the end of a delightful hex.
Think wisely.
III) If the current owner has lost this book, well that's too bad, isn't it? And you're blacklisted. I don't take kindly to my (prized) possessions being misplaced or not awarded the care and safety they should be given upon reception.
IV) Payments occur upfront. Half upon the request, the other half once it has been fulfilled. Additional wages may be demanded throughout the arrangement if needed.
V) Only the current owner of this book can read what is written on it or this note.
VI).Any further questions can be asked through the book.

It doesn't sound too convoluted.

Taehyung takes his quill, dips it in the jar of ink and flips the book's cover to the first page. He browses the tome. Hoseok must have spoken to the warlock through this book, yet no traces of a previous agreement or ink can be seen on the textured paper.

So, and without much overthinking, Taehyung writes his first name, age, along with the word 'prismatic' that Hoseok had whispered to him. He turns to the second page and waits for a response.

The pulsations of his heart hasten.

As a dragonborn, Taehyung is familiar with the Arcane, however his ease with it diminishes when it involves warlocks, in spite of his exhaustive knowledge regarding arcanes.

His fingers drum on his knee while he twirls the quill with his other hand. He hears some footsteps downstairs. They pause for a brief moment before their pit-a-pat continues. Then silence envelops the house again, some distant rustle disturbing it.

Taehyung writes a *'Hello???'* and counts to thirty.

Still nothing, no sentences are written back to him.

Taehyung's parched throat clicks when he swallows. He tosses the quill on the bedside table then climbs off his bed to make his way down to the kitchen. Jungkook is in his — apparently — favorite spot in the house, head resting on top of his own armchair's backrest, his legs drawn up to support the notebook he's scribbling on while the basilisk is in her own spot by the fireplace.

When Taehyung comes back upstairs, he promptly spots the dark lines that weren't there before. He scurries on his mattress and peers at the book.

"By the Elders…"

The sudden apparition is, admittedly, quite spooky, and his hair raises on his forearms

Hello???

State your full name. Thousands of 'Taehyung' exist in this world.

I can't disclose this.

Nothing is written back for a while.

The ink of Taehyung's quill remains on the paper and so does the warlock's in-between Taehyung's phrases. Taehyung sighs, berating himself for not probing Hoseok for more.

A haphazard and downright unhinged theory pops into his brain.

The book had been ‘quiet’, up until Taehyung had left his bedroom and had arrived in the kitchen. Jungkook had been writing in a book then, and right after it, when Taehyung had gone up once more, a reply had been given.

It’s a coincidence. Taehyung knows this. It’s him attempting to link together two occurrences independent from one another.

But what if?

Jungkook *had* reacted strangely to the sight of the warlock's book.

A grumble of his stomach tilts the scale toward insanity.

Taehyung finds himself in the kitchen once more, this time to retrieve some slice of bread that he slathers with jam. Jungkook is brushing the feather of his quill along his lips, his eyes cast on the ceiling. His head darts low, as if something in his opened book has commanded his attention. Taehyung waits until he sees Jungkook’s quill move across the paper to walk — read: race — inside his bedroom.

He freezes at the doorstep.

This can’t be…

Jungkook is human.

The most human to ever human in this world. Seohyung, Sungmin and Taehyung’s parents have never mentioned or hinted at arcane flowing through Jungkook’s veins. Because Amaris’ prince *is* human.

Isn’t he?

Taehyung doubts when he snatches the book and reads the answer. His disbelief heightens when he mulls over the timing that had been questionable. *Twice.* And it’s rendered more tangible by Jungkook’s earlier reaction.

Maybe there’s no correlation. Maybe it's an accidental happenstance. Or perhaps Taehyung has finally lost what sliver of sanity he has left.

Taehyung treks to the first floor and plants himself on The Armchair. Jungkook glances at him, but he doesn’t grant Taehyung any more attention as he focuses back on his task.

The jar of ink rattles when Taehyung places it on the ground. Quill in hand, eyes set on the arcanic book yet focused on Jungkook’s every motion, Taehyung responds to the warlock.

I suppose I can trust Hoseok. If an issue arises, you’ll give me your full name, and if not, I’ll figure it out myself.

What's your request?

Can you be trusted to not give away any exchanges written here?

Taehyung surveys Jungkook in his peripheral vision. The Prince is settled crossed leg, two books on his lap. He's making notes on the one propped on his right thigh. Nothing appears in Taehyung's book.

However, when Jungkook scribbles in a page of his left book, writing blooms in Taehyung's.

No fucking damn way.

Taehyung does not jump to conclusions yet — or at least not more than he already has. It could still be a coincidence. An eerie and absurd one, but still a coincidence. So Taehyung gives Jungkook the benefit of the doubt.

Surely, if the Prince is the warlock Hoseok has been striking deals with, Jungkook wouldn't be foolish enough to do so right in front of Taehyung.

Yes. The writings will be gone at my will once we've worked out our arrangement.

What's the average cost for your services?

My prices are by the hour and vary depending on the resources I'll need and how much time it'll take me. It can go from 30 coins to a hundred times that amount and more.

The exact same pattern happens.

No reply. Then Jungkook writes, and letters form on the paper.

Taehyung surges from his armchair, the arcanic book sliding off his grasp to tumble down. He marches toward Jungkook, and unceremoniously snatches the left book.

He sees too late the opened vial of ink on Jungkook's knee, the small jar vacillating before spilling its content on the blanket and right book.

"What are—"

Taehyung scans the book.

Drawings of herbs, flowers and more flora fill the double pages. Comments about a plant's family, their name's ethnology, along with their characteristics and a detailed description of their shapes

and colors are neatly annotated next to the sketches.

The book Taehyung had believed to potentially be of an arcanic nature is an exhaustive — and pleasingly organized — botanical compendium.

Jungkook wrenches the notebook from Taehyung's grip. He looks down at his lap where the other tome's pages are drenched in jet black ink. Revna slithers across the room and carefully crawls up the couch. She probes her snout against Jungkook's wrist but he shoos her away. She vanishes inside the ruby.

Taehyung is torn between the uncomfortable churning within him and this vindication that he had intended to fulfill, however not in the way he had predicted it to unravel.

He had thought that perhaps, this was it. That he had finally unearthed Jungkook's secret, but Taehyung isn't so sure at present. Especially when Jungkook's gaze that flickers upward ignites with a stifled anger. Or when Taehyung glances at the warlock's book behind him and sees a word materializing on it while Jungkook is not writing anything.

"You ruined the book I've been working on for *months*," Jungkook rasps, his hands clenched around his books, and Taehyung worries for a split second that the Prince may swing one at him. "You're—" The muscles of his jaw shifting underneath his skin.

If Dahee had been here, she would have slapped the back of Taehyung's head and urged him to apologize to Jungkook. However the house is devoid of residents, saved for the one positively fuming at the second standing still like an idiot.

"I can't even begin to fathom what may have through your mind to do this," Jungkook continues, his voice leveled with a glacial edge, "or what, *exactly*, is wrong with you, but do *not* touch my belongings without my permission, let alone yank them away from me."

"I wanted—" Taehyung's mouth clicks shut.

Akin to a couple weeks ago, bile rises at the back of his mouth at the sole concept of uttering those three words Jungkook would deserve to hear. After all, Jungkook is not part of the humans Taehyung would slaughter if he were to meet them again, but Jungkook is still a human, and a Jeon at that.

"Whatever." Jungkook stands. Taehyung has to take a couple steps back to save his chin from a headbutt. Jungkook gathers his notebooks, quill and glass jar, uncaring of the ink that transfers on his fingers. "I don't know why I thought you'd apologize, but that's clearly asking too much of you."

"Listen—"

"No." Jungkook's harsh gaze is smoothed by a deceptive indifference. "Don't speak to me."

Taehyung bristles at the tone but makes no mention of it. Jungkook doesn't bother taking the soiled comforters with him, leaving them on the couch as the stain of ink spreads through the fibers. Taehyung swallows down the guilt. He shoves it so far down his chest that it becomes a distant, forgettable sting.

Humans have no merit for sympathy and remorse.

Taehyung knows this better.

It's with this conviction that he enters his bedroom after picking up the warlock’s book. He crashes on his mattress, a sudden tiredness weighing his body. He reads the warlock's response and resumes their negotiations.

So?

I need something that would allow me to detect any kind of magic.

In an object or someone?

The reply is instantaneous, too fast for it to be Jungkook who’s walking through the corridor. The bathroom’s door opens and locks a moment later.

Could it be both?

The former would be easier. It’d take me 1/2 days to create the spell and implement it in an object you could then use to determine the arcane in an inanimate object. Living things such as plants for example can be included as well. As for the latter, it’s a lot trickier for living beings like animals, humans, dragonborns, warlocks and other creatures. It can become quite intricate and delicate to detect and identify arcane in this case.

Both are complex nonetheless if you truly want the object to detect all kinds of arcane, including ancient, rare, banished and/or expunged ones.

What about detecting arcane in a small zone? Whether in a human or object?

Hello?

???

I'm thinking.

And?

And it could be done, although the broader the zone the less specific and detailed the results will be. It'll also take me a while if you want it to detect arcane in a living being. A week or two will be needed at the very least for the creation of the object, perhaps more depending on different factors. Which option do you prefer?

Identifying arcane in an object and living being in a small zone, preferably through a discreet means.

When you say any kind of arcane, do you mean all?

Yes.

Warlocks/dragonborns/arcanic creatures/familiars' arcanes fall under many umbrellas, some that are extremely ancient and complex to decipher.

Every arcane, those that are supposedly not existing anymore included. I want to cover as many possibilities as I can.

That makes it more difficult. And pricey. It'll take 7 to 13 days to complete.

The date doesn't matter as long as it happens. How much will it cost?

10k coins. Half in advance.

Fucking hell.

Do you accept payments in gems?

No. Coins only.

Alright.

I'll start after receiving the first wage.

I can pay now?

Taehyung startles when a curve is drawn in the middle of the third page. More lines trail after the first one, all connecting, some crossing together. A thicker one paints a half circle, coming into contact with those at the top and forming what Taehyung recognizes as a pouch.

Grab the pouch.

It's on the damn paper how the hell am I supposed to grab it

1) watch your tone if you don't want me to double the price due to an insolence fee, 2) reach for it like you would if it were sitting in front of you.

Taehyung's brows knit. In spite of his growing perplexity, he does as ordered and extends a hand toward the page.

His fingers meet void where they would normally feel the texture of the paper. They traverse the book, deep where their pulp should touch the bed sheet. Yet, instead of the soft cotton, Taehyung's fingers graze on what feels like leather. They curl around an object that he drags out of the paper.

The pouch rests at the center of Taehyung's palm. It's of the same color and material of the book's pages, and what is uncanny about it, is that the edges of it, its shape and folds are drawn with black ink. He squeezes the pouch and the new wrinkles are also made of ink. Taehyung imagines that this is what holding a four dimensional sketch would look like.

If Taehyung is completely honest with himself, he's both fascinated and unnerved by the warlock's arcane. He has rarely approached warlocks, let alone interacted with them. At least not in a positive

light.

Writing appears in the blank space where the pouch had once been drawn.

Whenever you're done gawking at the pouch, put the coins in it. Half. 5k. I'll count.

A heat creeps up Taehyung's cheeks.

He stands and clears his throat as he opens the bi-fold doors leading to his walk-in closet.

A feet tall and wide bank vault is situated at the back, tucked against the wall and concealed. Taehyung crouches and unseals the combination lock. Five thousand coins won't fit inside the pouch, but the warlock hadn't seemed worried about it, and so Taehyung shrugs to himself as he begins to fill it.

The pouch, to Taehyung's surprise, seems to be bottomless, neither expanding or being jammed to a point of saturation.

He writes back to the warlock minutes later, his vault's content depressingly diminished.

It's done.

Rest the pouch on an empty page then close the book. I'll contact you about the progress.

Taehyung flips the book shut then pries it open.

His and the warlock's writings are gone, the pages as blank as they were when he had first acquired the book.

He does not have any secret drawer or chest to leave the arcanic book in, so he opts to place it in his vault. Once done, he lays down on his bed, an arm thrown over his face.

A sense of accomplishment appeases Taehyung's mind. He'll eventually know more about the basilisk' abilities and if Jungkook is hiding another arcanic object akin to the necklace. Plus it might be of aid for the primordial stone as well that he assumes to be arcanic.

A knock jostles Taehyung from his wanderings.

When Taehyung pulls the door open, it's to a frowning prince peering at anything but Taehyung.

"The heater isn't working," Jungkook mumbles, shuffling on his feet. "Water's too cold to shower."

"The heater is mechanical. It tends to freeze and get stuck during winter." Taehyung's eyes drift to the ruby dangling around Jungkook's neck. "You need to light the fireplace underneath."

“How long will it take to heat it up?”

“Couple hours," Taehyung answers. Jungkook nods and turns on his heels. Before Jungkook can walk away, Taehyung says “Or a few minutes if I warm it.”

Taehyung doesn’t check to see if Jungkook follows him down to the basement.

Arcane already slotted on the fire aspect, Taehyung flicks a tiny ball of fire at the burner of an oil lamp attached on a wall as he steps inside the basement. He reiterates the motion with the fireplace installed under the heater, albeit with more vivid flames to ignite the cut logs of oak. A hand tucked in his pants’ pocket, the other sprawled on the heater, Taehyung summons a warmth in his palm to heat the barrel of water without melting through the metal.

“Should be good,” Taehyung announces after a brief instance.

Jungkook pads up the stairs first, Taehyung on his toes. The two climb to the second floor where Jungkook wordlessly slips inside the bathroom.

Taehyung pauses at the landing. His fingers drum on the handrail, his head turned to the bathroom's wooden door.

He blows out a puff of air.

This good deed should suffice as an alternative apology, he guesses. He won’t exert himself in earning a forgiveness he has no concern for.

The bathroom door swings open.

Jungkook stills when he notices Taehyung. “Do you need something?”

“I don’t need anything and certainly not from you,” is Taehyung's reflexive retort. He internally winces.

“Right. My bad.”

“I didn’t mean to do that. With the ink and your book,” Taehyung adds.

“Then why did you snatch it away?”

“I just— I thought… you were… scheming something,” Taehyung mutters, less and less convinced by his own words, and so is Jungkook if the disbelief that washes across his face is any hint.

“It’s as though you haven’t heard a single thing I’ve said during that one dinner with your parents.”

“I listened, but that doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“You have to understand that it is in my best interest to not antagonize you because *you* are against my parents, just like I am. The enemy of my enemy is my ally.” Jungkook crosses the distance, a hand on the staircase’s rail, halting a couple feet away from Taehyung. “I don’t know why it’s so impossible for you to accept this.”

“It’d be easier if you told me your other secret.”

Jungkook levels Taehyung with an unimpressed look. “Nice try, Taehyung. Maybe next time you should—”

A rumble cuts through the end of Jungkook’s sentence. The sound is faint, muffled by the walls and stirring from above.

Jungkook looks at the ceiling even if he can’t see anything. “What was that?”

“A thunder,” Taehyung growls and swivels around. He rushes down the stairs, the pitter-patter of Jungkook’s slippers chasing after him.

“Thunder? It’s not raining though?”

“ *A* thunder,” Taehyung corrects. “A group of dragons.”

“Oh.”

Yes.

Oh.

It’s nothing unusual for thunders to fly above Taehyung’s home, except when the roars of dragons’ sweeping wings erupt in the middle of the night.

Taehyung and Jungkook rush through the living room.

They observe the night sky through the bay windows.

What looks like a group of twelve or fifteen dragonborns is drifting through the sparse clouds. They’re flying high: tiny, dark speckles noticeable in the moonlight. Taehyung can’t tell from the ground who might be at the head of the thunder. He’d have to turn and fly off himself, but he doesn’t need to for a presumption to flare in his head.

Jungkook must have drawn a similar conclusion because he says “It’s Seungwon, isn’t it? It’d explain why he was there earlier. Are dragonborns nocturnal?”

“Not more than humans.”

The thunder continues its path to the south-east, toward the series of islands connected to Vanae’s land. If he and Jungkook are correct, and Seungwon is the one leading the squadron hell knows where, there *has* to be a goal at the end of this trip.

“Pisses me off so fucking much. Seeing him parade in my land, threatening me because he knows I can’t do shit against him,” he curses, his fingernails sinking into his crossed arms. “Should've snapped his damn neck when I had the chance.”

Taehyung can nearly touch — *taste* — this untamed viciousness that crawls within his arcane. It meddles with his breaths, two of them coalescing together. Soon, petrichor suffuses his nose, his senses alert and on edge. An involuntary wave of goosebumps pebbles his skin, doing nothing to alleviate the ache in his scars.

Jungkook shudders next to him. Taehyung’s muscles strain to smother the swelling storm.

Taehyung’s wrath rarely submerges him in this manner anymore. Throughout the years, he has learned to placate it, as well as repress it when the situation demands it, or when he simply does not have a choice.

However now, his efforts and growth feel nonexistent. *Worthless*. Rendered null by the bloodthirsty impulse to shift and be the reason why Seungwon’s head would be severed from his body at last.

One of Taehyung’s feet slides on the ground. However, before he can give life to his fantasy, Jungkook speaks up.

“It wouldn’t be wise to pursue him now, while outnumbered and unaware of their destination. They were high enough to be inconspicuous to most. Purposefully,” Jungkook starts, and Taehyung listens. “I believe it’d be smarter to have Seungwon assume that our enmity from him stems from a silly yearn for vengeance, rather than because we suspect his actions. He might be hiding something. This midnight flight is odd. If we hide the suspicions we nurture toward him, it’ll be easier to spy on him since he won’t suspect a thing."

Jungkook's voice is calm and controlled, a stark contrast to how Taehyung feels. A certain gentleness coats the Prince’s words, sharpened by assurance, and this dichotomy strangely helps Taehyung’s fingers in relaxing around his arms, his gritting teeth stilling.

Jungkook's calculating eyes search for Taehyung’s, and when they lock together, he smiles. “Being underestimated comes with a lot of advantages. If we allow it to happen with Seungwon, who is vain yet laughably moronic, God knows reducing him to a destitute man will be an easy task. *If* he’s doing anything particular, because we aren’t—”

“He is."

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” The warning Seokjin had shared with Taehyung during the fitting of his suit is still fresh in his mind. “There’s been rumors, allegedly. Seungwon is apparently dissatisfied with his lands. He wants to expand or conquer, probably both. He has his eyes set on Vanae's prolific lands.”

Seungwon wouldn't be crazy enough to start a war against Taehyung, but the dragonborns always has some cards up his sleeve.

What if one of those cards is Jungkook?

Jungkook living with Taehyung would be the perfect occasion for Seungwon to kill two birds with one stone. But Jungkook’s hatred for Seungwon would be fabricated, if so. If there’s one thing Taehyung retains no distrust over, it’s the potent animosity Jungkook feels toward Seungwon. Plus according to Seokjin, those hearsays had been floating around long before the announcement of the wedding.

Taehyung sighs.

In addition to the plague killing dragonborns every three months, the unknown dangers the primordial stone may elicit, and Jungkook’s parents that may be plotting dragonborns’ demise, Taehyung will also have to worry about Seungwon’s actions.

The wedding has not even begun, yet it has already proven itself to be a challenging misfortune.

“That's worrisome,” Jungkook hums. “Either way, keep in mind that I hate Seungwon, perhaps not as much as you do, but still. We at the very least have that in common.”

“Who do you hate more than him?”

“My parents."

“And who do you hate more than your parents?”

“No one,. And yes, not even the prick who ruined my botanical book because he’s a paranoid idiot. You may despise me, but I don’t share that sentiment.”

Taehyung ignores the quip. The storm within him has settled down, the petrichor abated to a lingering scent of wet earth. “I’ll prioritize your parents and their nonsense about the primordial stone. Seungwon can wait.”

“Should we still keep an eye on him?”

Taehyung internally grimaces at the ‘we’. “Yes.”

“Do you think—” Jungkook’s lips press shut. He hugs his torso, brushing his hands up and down his sides.

“What?”

“There isn’t much I can do if a dragonborn decides to take me away or kill me. Which in retrospect does not matter much, but I’d rather not die so soon if possible,” Jungkook adds with an uncanny levity.

“Seungwon won’t hurt you so recklessly.” The dragonborn may be impulsive, but he wouldn’t risk a war against Vanae. “Even less once married to me. He would not only have Vanae as his foe, but also Amaris.”

“It could happen if he tasks someone to do it for him and pretends to know nothing afterwards.”

“Are you implying that I’m that someone?” Taehyung wonders, offended that Jungkook would even suggest this.

“No.” Jungkook snorts, inelegant and mocking. “You’re too brash and blunt for that. You don’t strike me as the kind of man to have the patience to manipulate.”

“Fuck you,” Taehyung spits and Jungkook laughs. “I can if I want to.”

“I never said you can’t, just that you won’t.” Jungkook’s amusement paints his lips with a curl. “I could disappear tomorrow." Taehyung studies the Prince, the latter’s expression smoothing to apathy. “I could, and no one would notice until it’s probably too late. As much as I hated my life at Amaris, there was some sense of security there that I lack here.”

“You could wear a leash that I’d hold and walk you around with so that you don’t vanish into thin air, how about that?”

“What is it with you and me on a leash? Is there something I should know, dear future husband of mine?”

Taehyung has never met someone that matches his wit and bounces his snark with impudent *bratty* quips. It's disorienting. And annoying.

So after scrutinizing the empty sky, Taehyung pivots to stride toward the stairs. "I'll leave before I make you disappear myself."

"Goodnight," Jungkook sing-songs.

The retort lies on the tip of Taehyung's tongue, but his thoughts trace back to the ruined book when he catches the tainted blankets, and he, for one of the very few times in his life, shuts up.

Back in the tranquility of his bedroom, Taehyung retrieves the warlock's book.

Could you create a spell or something like that to track someone's location?

You're the second person to ask me this.

Second?

To answer you: yes, I can.

How much?

1k.

Why are your prices so damn high?

I work well and fast. If my prices are too high for you, you can refer to another warlock, however good luck finding one of my scope and skills.

Black lines are drawn on the paper, the curve creating the shape of a hand, the middle finger upright while the other fingers are bent.

Taehyung rolls his eyes.

I’ll think about it.

Was Hoseok the one who requested a tracking spell?

No.

Who was it?

Who are you?

fuck off

;)

Taehyung slams the book shut.

Chapter End Notes

PS: the man eating hearts story Jungkook mentioned is a little hint toward a future story of mine hehe, promise it won’t be as gruesome as Jungkook made it sound to be 🫶 (I think...)

❧ Twitter

Chapter 6: One secret, two secrets... Three secrets?

Chapter Summary

Taehyung learns more than he could have hoped for, and it does nothing to abate his suspicion of Amaris' Prince. Meanwhile, Jungkook struggles with his own investigation of Taehyung's secret, until a mundane pack of water brings him closer to the truth.

Chapter Notes

!!Please read!!

There's some sort of 'editing' at the beginning of this chapter like the previous one, so if possible keep the 'Creator's Style' but if you don't it won't bother the comprehension of what's happening either way don't worry 🤍

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung should have probably delayed the consumption of his breakfast for a later time when the piece of scrambled egg he's munching on goes down the wrong pipe.

The cause for his early death is a ring, one drawn on a page of the warlock's book. It looks ordinary, aside from how realistically painted it is. The jewelry is a simple band of gold with engravings on the inner part that Taehyung can't read nor decipher. He coughs and clears his throat, washing down the egg with a gulp of water.

A knock elevates in his bedroom, trailed by the Prince's voice.

"You're alright in there?"

"Yeah," Taehyung croaks out.

"I'm going out in a few to carry on with the wedding preparations, I'll be back tonight," Jungkook announces, as if Taehyung cares for the Prince's whereabouts.

"Yeah."

"What an enlightening discussion."

Taehyung glares at the door, hoping that Jungkook can feel it through the wood.

He waits until the pit-a-pat of Jungkook's slippers is gone to peer at the writing cascading under the ring's painting.

Good news: I finished earlier than expected.

Bad news: the ring can technically detect every kind of arcane in an object and/or living being, however for the more ancient and obsolete ones, it won't be able to decipher which specific arcane the object/living being you want to inspect holds.

Because of this, your request will happen in two steps.

First off, you use the ring to evaluate the type of arcanes in a five feet circle around it. Then, if the object(s)/living being(s) you inspect withhold an ancient/rare/expunged arcane(s), and if you want to know which one(s), I will make a second ring to properly determine the arcane(s) in question for this specific object(s)/living being(s) IF that is possible. It'll require an additional fee.

I've also taken the liberties to give the ring the ability to acquire more information about the object(s)/living being(s) it'll inspect to make it easier for me when/if the creation of the second ring happens.

<u>Instructions:</u>

1) take the ring then pass it on a finger or simply hold it.

2) the gem at the top works like a button, press it once to scan an area.

3) after scanning once, deposit the ring in the book then close it.

4) when you'll open the book, the list of the object(s)/living being(s)'s properties will be written on a page.

<u>Important:</u>

1) make sure to leave the ring in the book in-between two scans to retrieve the information.

2) if you don't, the last area the ring has scanned will be the one whose properties will be analyzed, not those before.

3) the ring has an infinite amount of use.

4) any object the ring's gem touches will have its composition analyzed as well (does not work on living beings)

Taehyung does not waste a second to reach for the ring. Its material feels both like paper and metal, a strange dichotomy that has him rolling the jewelry between his fingers. He pinches it, exerting enough force to bend it if it were a regular one, yet it does not budge, even when he tries to — foolishly — crush it.

To give the ring a try and see for himself if it properly functions, Taehyung presses on the emerald gem then rests the ring in the book and closes it. When he opens it, the nature of his breaths and potency appears, along with those of the arcanic book.

Some rummaging sounds erupt from downstairs.

Taehyung takes the ring. After hiding the book under his mattress like a teenager stashing away their diary, he rushes out of his bedroom to join Jungkook on the first floor.

Jungkook is seated at the kitchen counter, eating his breakfast. The golden chain holding the ruby is fastened around his neck, swaying whenever he hunches to egg a bite of egg. In a baffling sight rivaling the one of a cat, Revna, *a basilisk,* is playing with a ball of yarn, kicking it away with her snout then chasing after it in zig-zags.

Taehyung busies himself with washing his plate.

The ring is slung around his index, more inconspicuous this way. However, it is trickier to find the perfect moment to press on the gem and scan the basilisk, Jungkook and the ruby all at once. Taehyung also hopes to get in the scan the book Jungkook had temporarily lost after Woobin's attack.

Jungkook unknowingly solves the issue by calling out the basilisk while playing with his necklace, a distracted motion the Prince often does, Taehyung has noticed. Jungkook takes out his book. The first page is filled with writing that Taehyung makes an effort to not read.

"What else can that necklace do?"

Jungkook's head darts up. "Hm?"

"You're always fiddling with it," Taehyung remarks with an accusatory tone, watching in the corner of his eyes the basilisk reduce the distance and enter the area of action for the ring. "I'm assuming it can be more than a vessel for the basilisk."

"Not everything I do is a secret ploy. Nothing is, actually."

Taehyung dries his hands with a rag. He rounds the kitchen island to halt in front of Jungkook, and he opts to be bold rather than skittish to erase any potential suspicions.

So Taehyung grabs a hold of the necklace. He twists the jewelry this and that way, making sure that the gem adorning the ring is pressed on by the ruby. “Is it linked to your secret?” He wonders, partially to satiate his curiosity, but also to detract Jungkook from the contact that he may find odd from Taehyung who has done his damnedest to limit any contact between them.

For once, Jungkook is the one to jerk away from the proximity. He retrieves the ruby from Taehyung’s grasp, his gaze wary when it meets Taehyung’s. “It’s a ruby that Revna can come in and out of. Nothing more.” Jungkook pushes himself off his stool and walks to the entrance door where he slides his winter apparel on. “Still don’t want to join?”

“No. I’m busy today.”

“Have a good day then, prick."

Taehyung makes his way to the stairs while Jungkook walks through the garden in the direction of Dahee and Junhyun’s home. Once out of view, Taehyung dashes to his bedroom. He lifts his bed with a tad more strength than necessary, the mattress, pillows and blankets thrown on the floor.

Taehyung seizes the book. He removes the ring and after placing it in the middle of a blank page? he closes the front cover that he swings open a brief lull later.

A series of writing greets him.

Taehyung’s lips part the more he reads.

General information of the touched object(s):

Composition I (CI): gold 91%, silver 5%, copper 2%, zinc 2%.

Composition II (CII): mineral corundum 20%, blood 70%. Remaining 10% are unknown.

Arcane: found in CII. None in CI.

Arcane type(s) found in CII N°1: dimension manipulation.

Arcane type(s) found in CII N°2: ancient. Could not decipher which type.

Next is the list of arcanes the ring has detected in its zone, and Taehyung skips over his own listed breaths to read the other type of arcanes.

General information of the scanned area:

Arcane: found.

Arcane type N°8: venom.

Arcane type N°9: ancient. Could not decipher which type.

Arcane type N°10: ancient. Could not decipher which type.

Arcane type N°11: material manipulation. (Material(s): ink.)

Arcane type N°12: ancient. Could not decipher which type.

Arcane type N°13: ancient. Could not decipher which type.

Arcane type N°14: ancient. Could not decipher which type.

Arcane type N°15: dimension manipulation.

Total number of arcanes found: 15.

Arcane(s)'s potency: unknown.

Arcane N°8 lethality: variable.

Arcane N°9 lethality: ??/10.

Arcane N°10 lethality: variable.

Arcane N°11 lethality: 0/10.

Arcane N°12 lethality: variable.

Arcane N°13 lethality: ??/10.

Arcane N°14 lethality: ??/10.

Arcane N°15 lethality: 1/10.

Sentience: partial.

Personality: unknown. Could not decipher.

“Fucking hell.”

Taehyung doesn’t allow himself to spiral quite yet. He takes a piece of paper to jot down all that is written in the book in case it vanishes before he can memorize it all. It’s only when he has transcribed the list of properties that Taehyung rests his quill on his nightstand and folds his hands in front of his face.

Taehyung would yell an *‘I fucking knew it'!’* if he had not been so unnerved by his discovery.

He had predicted that the ruby and basilisk would contain *some* semblance of unusual arcane, however the results have exceeded any speculations Taehyung's mind may have formed.

"Where the fuck are the ancient arcanes from?" Are they perhaps detained in the ruby if it works like a cage? Or maybe there's another being like the basilisk in it, one that Jungkook has kept secret.

Taehyung muses about the sentience that is specified as ‘partial’.

He wonders if it's about the basilisk or the ruby itself. After all, if transmutation is one of the ancient arcanes, the ruby could have once been a dragonborn, warlock or human. But even then, the sentience should be defined as full. The ruby would still retain the living being’s mind and soul that would have simply mutated into another vessel.

However transmutation *is* a complex arcane with a plethora of intricacies that Taehyung hasn't gotten to learn.

He raises the note to his face, rereading the properties over and over again. He *needs* to know more and he’s about to scribble down some questions when more writings appear in the warlock’s book.

Where the fuck did you scan

How is that any concern of yours?

Answer me

I will if you tell me who you gave a tracking spell to, and also if you confirm being the warlock who created the ruby or perhaps got into contact with the living being(s?) the ring analyzed. I’m guessing there aren’t hundreds of warlock adept in material manipulation, let alone specialized in ink, like you are.

The ring disappears from the page. Its list of properties does as well, and Taehyung is thankful for his forthcoming. He pushes his note further away from the warlock's book in case the latter can somehow erase the ink from it too.

Is your full name Kim Taehyung

From Vanae

"How—"

Taehyung's teeth click. His brows furrow and he rubs the pad of his thumb along his lower lip.

Confirming the warlock's inquiry is too risky, yet it is also pointless to lie. The warlock already knows the answer, it seems.

Now.

Why are you spying on your own husband?

I'm not the Taehyung you assume me to be

Please

I'm smarter than that, you should be too

I know you touched something belonging to your betrothed and scanned the area around him. Let's both save each other's time. You and I both know you're in his direct vicinity considering that you live in the same house as his. What I'd love to know is why you would go behind his back to do this.

You're Yoongi

I don't appreciate seeing someone I consider as my brother being played with

Right

Because I'm the one playing games here?

You hired a warlock to violate your betrothed's privacy. That should answer your question.

You would have done the same if you were in my place. Let's say you're a dragonborn welcoming in your house the very kind that had once attempted to eradicate your people, yeah? Let's say this person is a Jeon at that. Now let's add the fact that this human has been acting suspicious. Oh, and he's also hiding a basilisk pet.

You'd also wonder what this secret (secrets?) is and if another betrayal that may cost my family's lives is at the end of the line.

Everyone has secrets. You included I'm sure. That doesn't fully answer why you did this in the first place when I know that Jungkook has never shown anything remotely close to malice toward you or dragonborns in general. Jungkook isn't like his parents and anyone with a functioning brain can see that.

It answers some questions I had though, but I have a few more rising now

How come Jungkook possesses a basilisk and objects brimming with several arcanes? Ancient arcanes, which is a feat on its own. Over a dozen were detected. Some of them could also be forbidden and/or expunged, and isn't that a curious thing for Amaris' prince to have? And why is the ruby made of 70% blood? That's quite worrisome, I think yourself would agree to that.

What or whose blood is that? Is it the basilisk's or someone else's? Will mine become part of it?

So many questions yet so little answers, and you blame me for doing what I do.

You do realize Jungkook will be made aware of this the moment I see him, right?

You do realize I'll confront Jungkook long before that, right?

Taehyung slams the book shut and throws it against the wall, an indent left where a corner hits.

Taehyung doesn't knock when he storms inside Jimin's house.

Clangs and rattles can be heard from the back of the residence where the workshop is. Taehyung strides there and barges through the already tattered door that winces under the harsh motion.

Jimin is hammering a hot plate of metal on which Taehyung can see shapes of spoons and forks. His tank top that had once been white is tucked in black working pants, the clothes along with the dragonborn in them dirtied with soot and dust.

Jimin looks up, arm in the air. "I'm still not done with your headpiece. I've been working on this commission for a nearby village," he says and strikes the hammer down, the cling punctuated by orange sparks. "If this is why you're here."

"I don't care about any of that." Taehyung slams the door shut.

"Hey! I haven't sunk this many hours into your headpiece for you to—" Jimin doesn't get to finish his complaint. Taehyung grips Jimin's arm, uncaring of the mixture of oil and sweat that transfers on his palm. Jimin tosses his hammer in a bucket where the water sizzles. "What's wrong with you?"

Taehyung leads them to a table. He moves aside the mess littering the surface to slap a piece of paper. "Read this."

"Good morning to you too?"

"*Jimin.*"

"Is Jungkook with you?"

Taehyung drops on a chair. "He left an hour ago."

A second chair scrapes across the wooden planks as Jimin tugs one to slump down on it. “Is this why you’re here? Sneaking around your future husband?”

“Jimin. I’m serious. Read it.” Taehyung slides the note toward Jimin.

“Okay, okay. Let me see.”

Jimin’s face goes through an array of expressions, a few worried, some unreadable, and most of them confused. A gasp breaks through the silence as he lowers his face closer to the note. “Wait, composition two is the ruby? Is this about Jungkook’s necklace and basilisk?” Jimin wonders and Taehyung confirms it. “But what about the other arcanes?”

“That’s what I’m wondering too.”

“How did you manage to get this list?”

Taehyung summarizes all that has gone down, and the explanation is received with a smack on the back of his head.

“You dickhead,” Jimin curses while Taehyung rubs at his scalp. “I can’t believe you did that to Jungkook.”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Not spy on your betrothed and breach his privacy?” Jimin reasons with an incredulous raise of his hands. “You’re better than that. I get your suspicions because he’s a human, but if you keep going down that road, you’ll be exactly like those humans you hate so much.”

It stings.

Taehyung doesn’t feel remorse for what he's done as much as he’s hurt by Jimin’s evident disappointment.

There’s a plague killing dragonborns, and if Jungkook has a connection with it, Taehyung is ready to go beyond and above to figure it out.

“I didn’t have a choice."

“Yes you did.” Jimin flicks the paper toward Taehyung, frustration swarming his gaze. “You could have—”

“You don’t understand what is going on, and it’s fine, it doesn’t matter. What does right now is—”

“What the fuck do you mean by it doesn’t matter? And you still haven’t told me why you’d spy on Jungkook like that.”

“Because I had to.”

“No you didn’t! You could have gone about this so many different ways, yet—”

“I don’t have a damn choice! I don’t when dragonborns—” Taehyung freezes. His mouth claps shut.

Jimin exhales. He rubs a palm over his lips before carding his fingers through his hair. “Let’s— Let’s calm down before either of us destroys my furniture. When dragonborns… what?”

“I can’t tell. Don’t ask.”

Jimin must catch onto the plea, or perhaps he hears the desperation in Taehyung’s low timber because he nods, a mute understanding passing between them.

“Alright. What's this about the ruby and the basilisk, then? Why— What does it mean? Why are there so many unknown ancient arcanes?”

“Jungkook is hiding something, and another thing is… occurring.I thought that the two of them are perhaps related. I wouldn’t put it past the Jeon family. *This* is why I did what I did, and I know it’s wrong but I frankly do not care,” Taehyung preemptively adds when Jimin opens his mouth to speak. “I don’t trust him, Jimin. I *can’t* trust him, and I do less now with this note.”

Jimin shakes his head. “I don’t want to help you with this, but...” He surveys the paper.

“Jungkook implied that his basilisk has more than one arcane, which is confirmed there. It mentions a partial sentience. I initially assumed it was about the basilisk, but what if it’s something else? What if Jungkook has a second creature he can control somehow? And what if said creature is able to manipulate an ancient arcane like transmutation arcane that allows it to change into the form of a ruby? It wouldn't be so far-fetched to assume it can wield other ancient arcane.”

“What do you want to do?” Jimin inquires.

“See this?” Taehyung points at the types of arcanes marked as unknown. “The ring couldn’t find what they are because they are *that* ancient, banned and/or forbidden.”

Jimin groans. “I don’t know anything about that.”

“I do. You’ve got some paper and quill?”

Jimin takes a minute to retrieve both, leaving his burden on the table along with a beaten up cup filled with ink.

“We should make a list of arcanes that once existed but were banned or went extinct,” Taehyung starts and grabs the quill then scoots closer to Jimin. “There’s quite a few, but we can add arcanes like blood, flesh or life manipulation, s—”

“Life?” Jimin echoes, leaning on his elbows to watch what Taehyung is scribbling.

“It was an arcane that could once control the literal life of someone. The users’ arcane was so corrosive that to manipulate it, they had to extract the lifeforce and/or arcane pool of another living being,” Taehyung explains, unable to keep at bay the interest that hastens his words. “It was an extremely powerful arcane, but one that came with a horrible cost. Half of the users self-destructed, while the other half were either killed or had their magic erased because of how the fundamentals of it went against humanity and life itself.”

A silence stretches in the room, interrupted by Jimin.

“Sometimes I forget how much of a nerd you can be when it comes to the Arcane."

Taehyung kicks Jimin's shin. "As I was saying, solar and lunar arcanes were also erased and banned after a warlock had nearly extinguished the sun, and a dragonborn the moon during a war. Transmutation is also forbidden and gone." *Technically,* he muses.

"What's transmutation?"

Taehyung awards Jimin with a snide look. "Do you know anything, you uncultured swine?"

Jimin kicks Taehyung back. "It's not my strong field."

"Transmutation has 'mutation' in it for a reason, dumbass. It allowed someone to change the shape, biology, genetics and matter of everything and anything. It could also alter arcanic properties, among other complex things I won't delve into to not exhaust you," Taehyung says with a taunting smile that Jimin responds to with a flick of his middle finger. "There was once the story of a man whose body was changed into one of a spoon after messing around with the wrong warlock."

"By the Elders… That sounds horrible. I'd rather die than have my mind trapped into a spoon."

"That's why it was banned. That's also why I'm adding it to the list."

"It says partial though. I doubt it's a dragonborn or human."

"Who knows what partial means in that case," Taehyung shrugs and writes the arcane type. "What else is there…" He taps the quill's feather on his lips. "Chronomancy, memomancy and necromancy were also banned eons ago and disappeared. Arcanes related to gems aren't banned but they did vanish after humans' greed killed groups of dragonborns who could create precious gems. I think I read something about abyssal arcane but I'm not sure. It might have been a tale," he hums. He adds a few more arcanes to the list. "I can't think of anything else. Any suggestions?"

"Isn't anti-arcane or however it's named banished too?"

"Akyronomancy. Anti-arcane for simpletons. It's not banished, per se, but it is highly regulated and controlled. Only a few warlocks and dragonborns can use it. One of our Elders can, and I'm fairly certain the Oracle can as well."

"Uh. I see."

"If it wasn't for anti-arcane, how could any other type of arcane be expunged from the world?"

"Good point, good point. Is that all?"

"It's already a lot. Too much, and we have nothing to reduce the possibilities."

"Now, now, no need to be such a grumpy grouch." Jimin takes the quill. "We can cross a few of them off by compiling what we know."

It takes a while to do so and some arguing as Taehyung and Jimin debate on which ancient arcane Jungkook's ruby and basilisk could possibly have. Jimin never fails to mention how despicable what Taehyung has done is, but he still begrudgingly helps.

They succeed in narrowing down the list, however not enough to be entirely useful.

Taehyung sighs and throws his head back. “Yoongi won’t give us a hand, obviously, so we have no way of confirming anything anymore.”

“It says that the ruby is made of 70% blood. I might be thinking too simply, but maybe this is it. It’s blood arcane and laced with transmutation.”

“But why would Jungkook have that? It makes no damn sense.”

“Well, you and I can’t answer that. Only one person can,” Jimin concludes. “Although we could always ask the parents. They may know something.”

“Let’s.”

“Mom won’t like what you did though."

“She’ll understand,” Taehyung mumbles. “And if not, I’ll use you as my shield.”

“Hey!”

Jungkook can’t quite pinpoint what it is, but he feels a little… A little left out, for lack of a better word.

Something has happened ten days ago, and he hasn’t been able to fathom what it is.

Taehyung is aloof and odd, as he tends to be, but it has reached an extent that it never has before.

First there was the book incident and the outburst that Jungkook still can’t understand the origin of. The second occurrence had been the very next day: an unknown event had transpired, one that had spawned a veer in the mood, not only between Jungkook and Taehyung, but also between Jungkook and Taehyung’s parents.

The intangible rift separating them is as evident as a square in the middle of a row of circles.

Taehyung hasn’t spoken a single word to Jungkook. He maintains a greater distance than before, to a point where Jungkook has only seen his soon-to-be husband *twice* in the past week and a half.

Dahee and Junhyun, who had been incredibly warm and welcoming, are more subtle than their son. If Jungkook hadn't been an observant man, he wouldn’t have noticed the discreet changes in their demeanor, like the way their smiles don't quite reach their eyes anymore. Jimin is the only one whose behavior has not changed, still treating him more akin to a friend, than a stranger to be wary of.

Jungkook, as independent as he is, can’t ignore the swelling upset within him.

He doesn’t know what he has done wrong to seemingly destroy the trust he had begun to build between himself and the Kim family. He has an inkling that *something* has been related to them, most likely by Taehyung who appears to be the bane of everything.

Revna hasn't liked the shift in the ambience at all, voicing out a leery displeasure whenever Taehyung wordlessly brushes past them. Jungkook has been doing his best to appease her growing ire, but it's impeded every time they're faced with everyone's standoffish behavior.

This morning, Jungkook is eating breakfast at the Kim Family main house. Jimin is there as well, and for once since the book incident and the day that had followed, the mood is lighter, perhaps aided by the general somnolence floating through the abode.

"Taehyung, can you fetch a pack of water from the basement?" Dahee asks.

"I'm not going down there," Taehyung huffs.

The remark does not phase anyone.

Anyone except Jungkook who finds it odd. Taehyung looks peeved, but why would he be? It's not the first time Dahee asks him to grab something for them, and Taehyung has never had any problem with complying.

"I can go," Jungkook proposes. Perhaps he can find out for himself what troubles Taehyung.

"Thank you, Dear," Dahee smiles.

Jungkook stands and leaves the table, walking to the basement after Junhyun has told him where to find the door.

He pulls it open and makes his descent. He lightens an oil lamp with the pack of matches next to it and holds onto it to illuminate his path.

Jungkook would label the place as mundane if it hadn't been for the smell suffusing his nose. It's one he can recognize among a plethora of other scents, one that, if Jungkook were asked to describe it, would do so by using one single word.

"I'm gonna snoop around a bit," he warns Revna as he reaches the bottom of the stairs. "Keep an eye out for me."

Revna exits the ruby to slither down then toward the entrance of the basement where she stays to watch guard.

Jungkook trudges inside the main room of the basement, a second and smaller one adjoined to it. He sees a corridor at the far back on the right, and after checking in on Revna to make sure he's alone, Jungkook walks down the narrow path.

There's a door at the end of it.

Jungkook rests his palm against it.

Engravings appear on it. From the bits of knowledge Jungkook has acquired through Yoongi, he understands that the signs are runes.

He'll never have the time to draw them in his book while being down there, and he also can't think of an excuse to loiter in the basement again unless it's requested, so Jungkook mumbles to himself some mnemonic patterns to remember the runes and be able to redraw them once in the privacy of his bedroom.

“Say,” Jungkook begins in a whisper. He leans near the stones and takes a whiff, his nose wrinkling in response. “You smell it too, yes?” Revna, back around his shoulders, inches close. She recoils and emits a noise of agreement after sniffing the air. “Why… Why does their basement smell like *death?”*

It doesn’t smell rotten, per se, but death has always been accompanied by a peculiar hint of grimness that cannot be mistaken with anything else. Jungkook has been acquainted with it many times in the past when he would 'visit' a cemetery.

It propels forward the question of *why* the Kim family basement would ever retain such a deep, ingrained scent. Those aren’t circumstances that can haphazardly happen, especially with how potent the scent is, permeating the walls and bizarre door. It’s been residing there for a while . *Years.*

The pulsations of Jungkook’s heart accelerate. His balled up hands clam up as they curl around the pack of water.

He makes no mention of the scent when he enters the kitchen.

His lips curve upward when Dahee and Junhyun smile at him, the latter relieving Jungkook from his burden with a *‘Thank you’*. “It’s dark down there. I almost didn’t see the oil lamp,” Jungkook chuckles and sits back on Jimin’s left.

“Taehyung, Jimin and I have our fire to light the room," Dahee explains.

“I’m guessing the oil lamp is a courtesy of Junhyun, then.”

“That it certainly is,” Junhyun laughs. “I’ve learned my lesson after the few times I nearly broke a bone when I had ventured into the basement without any light.”

Jungkook focuses on what he does best.

He laughs, smiles and utters the occasional quip welcomed with a witty retort on Jimin’s part. He does so even if tremors run through his hands that he hides under the table. Even if his heartbeat resounds between his eardrums and drowns the rest of the chit-chats. Even if it reminds him of how he had felt when he had met Seungwon for the first time.

Jungkook excels at pretending: pretending to be happy, pretending to not be scared while shoving down the apprehension to drape it with a veil of complacency.

So Jungkook continues to smile.

And plan his options.

Because if the Kim family turns out to be worse than any despicable man Jungkook has met in his life, Jungkook will have to run away, both from his own family and Taehyung’s.

For the next eight days, Jungkook can't shake off the growing conviction that something is deeply wrong.

Before, it had just been a sense of discomfort and vigilance, however now, it has grown to this intangible hand that coils around his throat and squeezes without ever letting go.

Jungkook and Revna are more alert around Taehyung's family and the man himself. Jungkook pays more attention to what he says and does, attentively choosing his words so as to not trigger anyone's upset.

The worst in all this is that Taehyung has noticed.

It reads like a dance between them, where Jungkook and Taehyung prowl around the other. They play a game of pretense, waiting to find out who will tear off the mask the other wears, yet neither of them speaks out.

It's worrisome.

Jungkook still hasn't unraveled what has provoked this abrupt veer. Only one major occurrence has stuck in his mind due to how unusual it had been: Taehyung has touched Jungkook's necklace.

Taehyung's arcane is an umbrella Jungkook has yet to fully delineate. The dragonborn can manipulate several types of arcane — or breaths, as he calls them. Perhaps one of them had allowed Taehyung to gain some kind of damming knowledge about Jungkook.

Either way? Jungkook has concluded that the change is either related to: 1) Taehyung touching the necklace, or 2) something Jungkook has done that Taehyung has seen when he had come back to the house that night.

Unnerved by the situation, Jungkook copes by exploring the forest

He doesn't believe the Kim family to be a bunch of reprehensible outlaws, but with the scent of death in their basement coupled with their odd behavior, Jungkook isn't sure of anything anymore.

For all he knows, they have been lying through their teeth about everything and are secretly murdering people and perhaps Jungkook is next on their list of victi—

Revna firmly nudges his mind.

Right.

He has to remain level-headed and *think*. Jungkook has been looking for any means to escape if need be, and it starts off by learning his way through the forest surrounding the house.

"Taehyung?"

"What," Taehyung gruffly says, sitting at the coffee table.

"Could you show me how to walk to Vanae's main city?"

Taehyung doesn't look up from the map he's been studying. "Why?"

'Because I want to have a sure path to use to run away from your potentially murderous family' , is what Jungkook thinks. “Because I’d like to familiarize myself with the city and its inhabitants, so I want to be able to get there without needing you to fly me.”

“*Why.*”

“I just told you? Plus I’m curious.” Jungkook shrugs to deflect Taehyung’s suspicions. Taehyung, as per usual, visibly does not trust Jungkook’s words. “Could you show me?”

“No. I’m busy."

Jungkook had not expected Taehyung to agree, which is why he jumps into the second part of his plan. “I’ll do it myself then. It’s fine.”

“Good luck with that.”

“I wonder what would happen if I were to get lost in the forest and meet an unfortunate end. What would be said if words of my death spread? That it could have been avoided if my betrothed had taught me my way in the forest on *his* land.”

A glare pierces through Jungkook’s gaze.

Bingo.

Jungkook should be scared, or at least on edge at his bold yet clever dilemma, but he’s occupied with fighting off the cocky smile that threatens to paint his mouth.

“What do you say? Should we find out?”

“Fucking viper.”

This time, Jungkook can’t suppress his smile. “Seohyung's lessons had their merit.”

Taehyung taps his quill on the table, his watchful eyes never straying away from Jungkook. “Let’s say I show you, you’ll need a good sense of orientation to not only remember the path, but also not to confuse two trees together. Getting lost in a forest is very, *very* easy.”

“I’ll remember."

“You sound exceedingly confident.”

“Rightfully confident."

“Alright.” Taehyung leaves his quill on the table and rises to his feet.

Jungkook gawks at Taehyung who walks to the entrance doors. “Wait! Wait, *really?*”

“Yeah. Let’s put your confidence to the test.”

This is too easy.

Taehyung should — *would* — have protested more. He wouldn’t help Jungkook simply for the sake of doing so, so it’s with an ever growing cynicism that Jungkook says “I’ll go get change.”

Minutes later, Jungkook is clad in more befitting clothes for an outing in the cold forest. Taehyung is waiting outside, his hair rustling at the breeze drifting through the grass. The hefty, wolf fur cloak is draped over Taehyung's shoulders. Jungkook has to admit that he's envious of it, the cloak looks particularly fluffy and warm.

"M'ready." Jungkook blows air between his palms, hands covered with a pair of gloves.

Taehyung marches to the outskirts of the forest, Jungkook on his trail. "I'll lead you to a place from which you'll guide us back to the house, and *then* to the previous spot, understood?"

"Understood."

Jungkook remains behind Taehyung as they trek through the prolific forest.

Pitter-patter of animals running through the woods, chirps of birds and snaps of twigs accompany the two of them while they venture deeper into the woods. The wind hisses through the leaves, and the breeze that slithers between the trees propels gusts of cold air on the duo.

He doesn't see any of *them* during the trek.

Jungkook admires the fauna and flora. He catalogs as many recognizable traits of the forest as he can, mentally retracing their steps to engrave in his mind the paths they're taking.

The walk could be deemed as aimless if it had not been for the way Taehyung purposefully has them pass through sinuous trails or walk by places with such minimal dissimilarities that a lesser man would assume Taehyung is leading them in circles.

Thankfully, Jungkook notices.

"You're not very sly."

Taehyung's head twists to peer behind his shoulder.

"You're obviously making it extra difficult for me."

"Of course."

Taehyung may be brash and callous, but his rough edges are softened by a mischievousness that can be more or less playful, more or less devious, often punctuated by a taunting smile or snide chuckle. Their absence here throws Jungkook off.

"I'll still succeed though," Jungkook challenges.

No rebuff leaves Taehyung's mouth, instead he says "We'll see about that."

Jungkook sighs and focuses back on his task.

He does have a great sense of orientation, so walking them back to the house shouldn't be too laborious. Plus he can always rely on Revna — if the latter awakens from her impromptu nap.

Jungkook regrets not bringing his sketching book with him. They stumble on gorgeous flowers and plants here and there that he'd love to study, in the hypothesis that he survives the Kim family's basement.

A gasp escapes his mouth at a flower Taehyung strides next to. Jungkook crouches in front of it.

“Taehyung!” Jungkook makes a beckoning motion with his hand at Taehyung who's surveying him from a safe distance. “Look at this one. I really should have taken my botanical book,” he mutters through pursed lips, arms folded around his knees. “It’s so beautiful.”

The colorful plant in question is nothing like any Jungkook has ever seen before.

It looks like a Lily of the Valleys, however in a *much* larger size. The main stem is of an off-white blue, as though made of snow, branching out in smaller arched stems with a flower dangling at the end. Each of the seven flowers has the same shape, with the petals joined at the stem then curving into a round, bell-like form the size of a fist. The leaves are elongated and thin, looking like petals themselves with their baby blue hues as they gracefully frame each blossomed flower.

What fascinates Jungkook is the array of pastel yet glowing colors. A flower is blue, while another is purple, a third red and so on. There’s a golden one at the very top clashing against the black of another flower.

Jungkook’s fingers itch to touch and paint.

“Do you know what it is?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me more about it?” As Jungkook has anticipated, Taehyung answers with a *‘Why?’* that Jungkook chuckles at. “Why do you keep responding with ‘why’ whenever I ask for something?”

“‘Cause you’re a cunning viper, among other things."

“A curious viper. There’s a difference of a few letters.” Jungkook rests his cheek on his knee. He musters his most genuine expression of interest — and perhaps cuteness, even if he does not think Taehyung is sensible to that, but Jungkook loves to believe that he can be charming even to those seemingly immune to it. “Please? I’d like to know what it is, it’s really pretty.”

Taehyung’s internal debate etches his face for a moment.

Jungkook waits, and his patience is rewarded with a sigh as Taehyung crosses the few feet separating them.

Taehyung squats next to Jungkook. “Touch the red flower,” Taehyung orders, but Jungkook is dubious, to say the least. “Do it.”

Jungkook blames it on his endless curiosity when he caves in.

He nudges Revna awake just in case, then he pokes at the red flower. He makes a noncommittal noise of awe when the petals swiftly retract on themselves, curling into a tiny ball. The reddish hues are gone where Jungkook’s finger came into contact with the flower, replaced by a light blue similar to the color of the stem.

“It’s called a Nix Septem Sana, commonly referred to as The Seven Nixes, or nixes for short."

Jungkook swallows down his bewilderment at the requested yet unexpected explanation. “The Seven Nixes?” He knows Latin and can translate himself the meaning of the plant’s name, but he’d rather listen to Taehyung, feeling strangely enraptured in the man’s husky timber.

“‘Nix’ means ‘snow’ in Latin, ‘septem’ means ‘seven’ and ‘sana’ means ‘heal’. Nixes only grow in winter and in dragonborn lands, as far as I know for the latter.”

Taehyung gathers some soil in his palms. Jungkook winces at how cold it must be, but the dragonborn is unfazed. Taehyung holds the ball of dirt that he brushes on the red flower. The petals swell and expand, and the flower regains its former size and red hues. Then, and after dropping the ball on the ground, Taehyung bumps a knuckle on the flower that shrinks and loses its color once more.

“It reacts to warmth,” Jungkook whispers in awe.

“Yeah, this one does,” Taehyung confirms with a side glance at him. “Each stem has seven flowers. They’re quite rare and coveted outside of winter.”

One of Taehyung's hand raises, two of its fingers clasped together and pointed at the nixes. It draws a quick, swiping motion, accompanied by a sharp whistle of wind that erupts in the air and startles Jungkook. The main stem of the plant is now sliced at the bottom that Taehyung catches.

"Oh," Jungkook breathes out. “How did you—”

“Either you stay quiet and let me explain, or I don’t,” Taehyung warns for the second time.

Jungkook raises his hands in defense.

“Each flower has specific properties, all linked to healing one way or another, directly or indirectly,” Taehyung resumes and brings the golden bell under his nose. “Some are easy to use, others require intricate *and* delicate manipulation. Some need to be burnt to ashes, others to be mashed, and one to have the nectar of its petals extracted, and so on. The complexity varies from nix bell to nix bell, but also in correlation to what use you seek from them. For example, the emerald nix bell makes an excellent antiseptic for opened wounds.”

“The ointment you gave me was made from nixes?” Jungkook wonders, thinking of the two jars that are still sitting on the vanity dresser in his bedroom. He gnaws on his lower lip at the stony look Taehyung shoots his way. “Sorry.”

“It is. The crimson nix is great for everything related to the skin and body in general. It can be good to speed up the healing process. It also helps with scarring, and before you ask, yes, the crimson nix is in the second ointment I lent to you,” Taehyung says when Jungkook opens his mouth. Jungkook sheepishly smiles. “The crimson one is a perfect example in terms of how convoluted implementing a nix in a concoction can be.”

Taehyung’s voice that had been clipped and raspy lightens up. There's something akin to a buzz in it, a childlike excitement shining in his eyes as he gently touches the petals. His words are slurred every so often, and it's as though his tongue does not shape quite fast enough for all he wants to say.

Jungkook’s restlessness of the past couple weeks alleviates, soothed by how Taehyung’s own mistrust and detachment is seemingly put aside for now, the two wrapped in this tentative bubble of

shared interest.

“To make a simple calming ointment for aching, I’d say that the complexity is at two out of ten. However if you want to use this nix to… Hmm… Accelerate the healing properties of a potion for broken bones, the difficulty flies up to six or seven out of ten.”

“Ooh."

Jungkook *is* fascinated by the newly obtained knowledge, however it pales in comparison to the dichotomy Taehyung paints: he's an impetuous dragonborn, one who does not shy away from spewing threats at any met human; yet he is also a man who happily rambles about a flower, holding the latter ever so softly, full of care for the fragile petals.

Jungkook allows his eyes to trace the curves of Taehyung’s profile. When he catches the barely perceptible upward lilt of Taehyung’s lips as he relates the nixes to a type of flower Dahee likes, Jungkook’s own lips curve in a smile that he buries in the crook of his elbow.

“What about the golden one? Or the blue one?”

“The golden one is an enhancer, which doesn’t sound like much at first glance, but it’s one of the most potent enhancers that exists,” Taehyung answers. “Let’s say you mix it with an antiseptic, the lotion can then immediately fight off an infection and create a disinfecting film on the wound. The golden nix makes everything better, stronger and more impactful, including arcanic properties. But it’s also the hardest and most dangerous one to use.”

“How come?”

“If you improperly work with it, it can turn into a corrosive substance, which can be fatal. It’s a bit of a double edged sword. The azure bell is just as dangerous, if not more. It can be use for arcane transfusion by healers, when their healing breath doesn't suffice on grievous wounds, but it's never used."

"Why not?"

"Because it's mortality rate is high: people either die trying to harness it, or they die after succeeding, but no one every found out why. I remember reading in a book that a healer once tried to heal their sister, managed to do so, only for them to both die later on without understanding why."

“That's fascinating... And what about this one? I’ve never seen a flower that has such a deep black. It’s not even reflecting the light. I think it’s my favorite one of the lot.”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook.

Their gazes connect for a lull before he peers back at the plant.

His fingers coil around the black nix. Tendrils as dark as the petals crawl up Taehyung’s fingers from the point of contact. They move up his hand and wrist, disappearing where the sleeve of the pullover begins.

They appear to follow lines.

Taehyung’s veins.

They crawl up to the collarbones, then neck and cheeks. The glow of the nixes paint Taehyung's face in faint patches of muted colors, and Jungkook can't look away.

He had found Taehyung impossibly beautiful when he had first seen him. Even if Taehyung's features are more often than not knitted into a scowl, the man remains incredibly gorgeous, even more when he smiles and laughs with his family.

"The raven nix is specific to dragonborns," Taehyung says, startling Jungkook out of his reverie. "It supposedly feeds on our arcane, or tries to, at least."

"What can it do with it?"

"No one knows."

"What?"

"No one has figured out what it does. All we've gathered is that when it touches a dragonborn's skin, tendrils expand to feed on the arcane they extract from us. It doesn't deplete it, and it doesn't devour it either. The sensation is weird, honestly. It simply… drinks. As though the flower is parched. Look."

Taehyung leans closer to Jungkook and tilts the plant to show the way the tendrils dissipate into dust when Taehyung retracts his hand from the raven nix.

"Oh my God…"

"This one is a mystery no one has solved. As for the others, I've exhausted my quota of speech for the day." Taehyung rises up

Jungkook mirrors him. "Have you studied botany?"

"You can keep it." Taehyung hands the stem to Jungkook.

Jungkook gently takes the present, cradling it between his hands. "Thank you." He deeply inhales the golden nix Taehyung had scented earlier. A hint of honey permeates the air. "Is it one I can dry?"

"Technically, yes, but it'll die and lose its colors in spring, whether you dry it beforehand or not," Taehyung says and he swivels on his feet to continue their walk.

"So every nix is sensitive to warmth."

"Yeah, but it only lives through winter regardless of the temperature."

"I'll still keep it when it'll wither."

"Why would you? You won't be able to use it for anything."

"Existence or worth does not stop after dying. Sometimes it can be the opposite, where something else can be offered after death."

"The hell does that mean?"

Ah. *There it is*, the everlasting scowl Jungkook has missed. He'd take this over indifference.

"What I just said." Jungkook points at the blue Nix. "What's this one?"

"Speech quota. Gone."

"Prick."

Jungkook keeps the stem of nixes in his arms throughout the trip. He's distracted by the colorful flowers and the forest itself, but he pays enough attention to retrace his and Taehyung's steps.

It's an hour later that Taehyung pauses as they reach a modest clearing of grass, partially obscured by a large weeping willow. He faces Jungkook, arms crossed over his chest.

"Now, it's your turn. Lead us back to the house and here again."

"Sure." Jungkook probes at the raven nix. No tendrils tickle his skin.

"You sound overly confident."

Jungkook smiles.

Not only does he easily guide them through the forest, but he does so with such efficiency that they safely arrive in front of their house 40 minutes later.

Jungkook twirls on his feet, hands clasped around the nixes behind his back. His face breaks into a grin as he sways on the ball of his feet. "I told you I could. It wasn't difficult at all," he boasts without an ounce of shame.

Taehyung's puzzlement morphs into this stony veil of mistrust, and Jungkook's smile wavers at the sight.

"It *should* be difficult. There is *no shot* you managed to remember the way back. Even your nightly outings wouldn't help with that."

"I did say my confidence is rightful."

"You're cheating," Taehyung blurts out. It must sound petty to his own ears because they tinge with a hint of pink.

Technically, Jungkook could have gotten a little external help from Revna, but he had chosen not to. "How would I cheat?"

"That basilisk of yours helped you."

"No. She didn't. So asking again, how could I cheat?"

"I don't know, you tell me. You're the one who cheated."

"I didn't."

"Yes you did."

"No."

“Yes.”

“No, I did not!”

“Yes you fucking did.”

“I'm telling you I didn't!”

The fight feels — *is* — childish, but as inane as it may be, the trepidation still brimming underneath the surface further abates within Jungkook. It's as though his and Taehyung’s relationship is back to what it had been before The Event that had sundered the mood into a valley of mutual suspicion.

“If so, explain to me how you got us back there so quickly and without getting us lost once. I've never heard of a human being capable of this."

Jungkook raises his fingers one by one as he numerates the points of argument. “One: I'm smart. Two: I have an unparalleled sense of orientation. Three: I used to spend a lot of time in the forest surrounding the citadel, so making my way through one is nothing new for me.”

“You can guide us back to the clearing, if so,” Taehyung dares.

“Probably, yes,” Jungkook muses, his aplomb waning a bit.

Taehyung steps to the side and nods toward the forest. “Lead the way.”

After leaving the nixes at the house’s front door rather than inside the warm interior, Jungkook skips by Taehyung, humming a lullaby under his breath.

This time, Taehyung is the one to trudge after Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn’t let it agitate him. It’s pointless to worry about any literal backstabbing or worse. If Taehyung wants to kill Jungkook, realistically speaking, there isn’t much that Jungkook can do. At least nothing that Taehyung is aware of.

They soon arrive in the lush center of the forest.

Jungkook’s thoughts meander, far to be inattentive of his direct surroundings, but close to not losing track of the path he’s supposed to follow.

So Jungkook startles when a hand that he knows belongs to Taehyung seizes his elbow and harshly pulls. Jungkook can’t even think about struggling against the grip before he’s slammed against a tree.

A palm smacks against Jungkook’s mouth.

He blinks, disoriented.

Taehyung’s face is out of his vision, tilted to the side and too close to Jungkook’s. Alarm bells flare in Jungkook. His instincts finally kick in, quite literally so when his knee digs into Taehyung’s stomach.

Taehyung winces. His free hand shoots down to grab Jungkook’s knee and, in a series of deft movements, Taehyung throws Jungkook off balance, tripping him on the ground. The two of them

tumble down.

“You better—”

Jungkook isn’t given the chance to finish as his legs are trapped under Taehyung’s. His hands are free, however, and he withdraws an arm as much as he can to swing his fist at Taehyung’s face. He misses. Taehyung catches both of Jungkook's wrists with one hand to bind them above Jungkook’s head. Taehyung’s other hand shushes Jungkook’s swelling protests.

“Stop fighting, you fucking—”

Revna is about to lurch out of the ruby when Jungkook’s teeth sink into Taehyung’s fingers. Blood suffuses his mouth and he uses the distraction to smash his forehead on Taehyung’s nose. Taehyung’s head jerks back with a grunt as he topples backward.

Jungkook channels the momentum to the dragonborn away from above him. He clambers on his knees and is about to spring up when nails bore into his ankle. He’s yanked on his front and dragged across the soil.

“Let me g—” Jungkook yelps when he’s tugged by the collar of his coat and flung on the same trunk as before. He’s panting, hands scrambling on Taehyung’s chest to wrestle himself free but Taehyung kneels on Jungkook’s thighs and wrenches his fingers around Jungkook’s jaw to pin his head against the tree.

Taehyung’s mouth parts open.

Voices erupt behind Jungkook, muffled and far away.

Jungkook freezes on his spot, his revolt dying on his tongue. His and Taehyung’s gaze lock together.

“I was hiding us, you fucking idiot,” Taehyung lowly hisses, blood trickling down from his nose.

Jungkook gawks. His fingers relax around Taehyung’s pullover, then they clench again to shake the imbecile of a dragonborn. “Tell me next time, you *cretin* ?!” He whisper-yells. “How was I supposed to know when you slam. Me. Against. Something. *Again*.” Jungkook punctuates each word with a punch on Taehyung’s pecs that seem to be sturdier than Jungkook had thought when he’d see them hidden behind loose shirts.

Taehyung brushes his sleeve against his nose. “Shut up.”

Taehyung is still holding onto Jungkook’s jaw, the hold slackened, his gaze unfocused and aimed to the ground.

It’s stupid, really, but Taehyung *really* is pretty.

And slightly intimidating.

His face is a couple inches away from Jungkook’s, which shouldn’t fluster Jungkook as much as it currently does, but a heat creeps up his neck and fills his cheeks the longer he stares at the mole under Taehyung’s right lower lid. Taehyung is so close that Jungkook can *smell* him: this waft of fire and pungent petrichor.

“Can you let me go?” Jungkook whispers.

Taehyung reclines then complies, the warmth of his fingers leaving Jungkook’s chin. He makes a shushing motion at Jungkook who nods.

“I’ll need you to go back to the house," Taehyung demands and moves off Jungkook. "Right now.”

“No.” Jungkook punctuates this by spitting on the ground, however not to be vulgar, but rather to get rid of Taehyung’s blood coating his tongue.

“I’m not asking.”

“And I’m not going back. I want to know what this is about and why we’re sneaking into the forest that is supposed to be yours."

Taehyung’s eyes dart between Jungkook and a point behind him. “This isn’t related to you.”

“How would you know? What if it’s Seungwon? Perhaps the stunt we pulled on him got to him more than we first assumed."

Taehyung seems to ponder on this for exactly six seconds. “I don’t care. I’ll go check myself while you go back to the house. You’ll be a hindrance if you stay.”

“I said no.”

“This isn’t a debate. You—”

Attention diverted by their arguing, Jungkook hasn’t heard the group venturing back to them until it is nearly too late. Neither has Taehyung whose frustration washes across his face.

Jungkook stills when Taehyung’s hands cup his waist, bringing their chests close as he curls an arm around Jungkook’s back. Then, he unceremoniously throws Jungkook on his left shoulder in one swift motion.

Jungkook grasps onto the back of Taehyung’s cloak. “Wha—”

“They’re coming this way. Shut up.”

Taehyung’s legs bend to propel himself. He leaps to grab the first branch of the tree. Jungkook’s belly swoops at every lurch Taehyung makes to climb the branches and carry them higher up the tree trunk.

If Jungkook is completely honest with himself, the swirls in his chest aren’t solely due to his slight acrophobia. He’s not really musing about how far the ground is from them. His mind is far too engaged in evaluating how *strong* Taehyung truly is as the dragonborn effortlessly lifts both of them from branch to branch.

Taehyung stills eventually, once settled on a branch thick enough to support them while offering them a safe vantage point, concealed by the dense leaves.

Jungkook precariously rests his feet on the branch, aided by the hands encasing his hips. The grasp is oddly gentle as Taehyung helps Jungkook crouch next to him to avoid any unfortunate fall.

Jungkook doesn’t look down, or anywhere that isn’t Taehyung or the tree. He can handle his fear of height during a flight with Taehyung where he’s distracted by the scenery and clouds, but it’s different here for some reasons, in spite of how less deadly a fall would be.

Securing himself with a hand gripping Taehyung’s coat and the other Taehyung’s knee, Jungkook internally sighs in relief at the solid anchor Taehyung’s body creates. One of Taehyung’s arms is still curled around Jungkook’s back, an additional support that the dragonborn seemingly doesn’t notice.

The voices become clearer and louder, and Jungkook recognizes one of them.

Chapter End Notes

I think you can all guess who Jungkook recognized 🤔

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's Visuals —

The Seven Nixes

Chapter 7: Eerie Phantosmia

Chapter Summary

> Some would say that the night is the most befitting time of the day to murmur answers to delicate questions, to unearth secrets and reunite with olds friends. Perhaps, it is also the greatest time for a token to be given and taken.

Chapter Notes

> !!Please read!!
>
> Same thing as before, there's some edit at the middle of this chapter like the previous one, so if possible keep the 'Creator's Style' but if you don't it is: a o k 🤍
>
> **Cw:**
>
> **1) Slur. A character refers to Jungkook as a 'little whore' in one paragraph after "...or rather the one that Jungkook assumes to be Jaehee."**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A shudder of ire racks through Jungkook. The ruby tucked against his chest heats up with a venom that coalesces with his aversion. Jungkook's nails would bore into his palms if it hadn't been for Taehyung's cloak.

He exhales, his breath shaky and fingers constricted.

Jungkook and Taehyung's gazes meet. The indifference in Taehyung oscillates, his searching eyes seeming confused.

Seungwon's intelligence isn't the sharpest one, and while he shouldn't harm Jungkook here lest he instigates a war, Jungkook wouldn't put it past the man to give it a go nonetheless.

"We're against the wind. They won't smell or see us from down there," Taehyung whispers, who must have picked up on Jungkook's discomfort. "He won't do anything to you."

"What if he still tries?"

"Then I'll handle him."

Taehyung sounds confident, but Jungkook can't help but be doubtful. Would Taehyung really prevail against a group of dragonborns that includes Seungwon, who is supposedly well-versed in combat?

If Jungkook is forced to confront Seungwon, he refuses to go down without a fight, and Revna echoes the sentiment with a hiss when she leaves the necklace to hide underneath his winter coat, half curled around Jungkook's neck.

“They’re about to pass under us. Don’t move or make a noise,” Taehyung warns.

Jungkook responds with a quiet noise of agreement. With what little time left he has before the group arrives, Jungkook shuffles closer to Taehyung, telling himself that it’s to seek warmth and not comfort. Taehyung does not grumble at the proximity, and neither does he pull away. Instead, and to Jungkook's surprise, Taehyung tightens his hold around Jungkook’s waist.

Jungkook reminds himself of the scent of death permeating Taehyung’s parents’ basement; that someone has died there or that a body had once been left in that place; but it doesn’t dampen this perhaps idiotic sense of safety that rises within him. But then again, if Taehyung’s intentions *are* cruel, why hasn’t he thrown Jungkook to Seungwon now that he has the chance?

What if Taehyung does, actually?

Jungkook isn’t given the chance to move away from the dragonborn before a disgruntled voice freezes him on his spot.

“The forest reeks of him,” Seungwon mutters.

“Well, it *is* his territory,” a woman answers.

“What are we doing here?” A man says. *Woobin.*

Jungkook glances down in spite of his better judgment.

Seungwon comes to a halt a few feet away from the tree Jungkook and Taehyung are perched on. His head, covered by the hood of a cloak, twists to peer at his son.

“I told you to wait and be quiet, didn't I?” Seungwon warns, the hint of the threat as subtle as a roaring griffin.

Woobin’s head lowers. The cockiness from a few weeks ago withdraws into submission. “Sorry.”

“I believe Taehyung and Jungkook left the house earlier,” a fourth person pipes up. The man retrieves an object that looks like a miniature sundial with minuscule writing on it. “I’m not sure where to. It’s dwindling and giving a location too broad to be useful.”

“Makes me wonder why I even hired you. Remind me to take back half of my payment,” Seungwon spits and plucks out a piece of paper that he unrolls. “We’re close to it. Two more hours of walking.”

“Is the Kim family truly not aware of the presence of this…” The woman makes a vague gesture.

“Answer that one for me, Hansol,” Seungwon urges.

“I can assure you my abilities are up to par with your requests,” Hansol says, the smile audible in the timber’s levity. “The veil is undetectable. No one has seen the pit, aside from me, of course.”

Taehyung is frowning, his fingers drumming on Jungkook's waist. Jungkook pinches Taehyung's knee to get his attention, then he mouths *'The pit?'* Taehyung shrugs.

"Jaehee, how much until it's gone?" Seungwon wonders with a jut of his chin toward the sundial.

"A few days at best, but I and the warlock can recast it if you or someone else is near Jungkook."

Seungwon chuckles, the same kind that would precede an unwanted hand on Jungkook's thigh or nape once upon a time. "This whore won't get away from me no matter how much he believes he can."

Bile rises at the back of Jungkook's throat, Revna's wrath a catalyst to his own. The grip stiffens on Jungkook's waist. Taehyung looks pissed after Seungwon's expletive, and his anger is comforting, somehow.

"What about Taehyung?"

"What about *Taehyung?"* Seungwon snatches Woobin's strands of hair to push his son's head down. "What about what I said, hm? I told to fucking shut up. Want to visit the room again, huh? Should I take you there to teach you how to be quiet? Is your discipline lacking this much since your last lesson?"

"I'm sorry, Father, it's just— Taehyung seemed protective of Jungkook."

"Anyone would want to stake a claim over a doll like Jungkook, even Taehyung." Seungwon throws Woobin to the side who stumbles but catches himself in time. "This vermin does not care about my doll. No one does, aside from me. I'm sure Taehyung would lend him back to me if I were to ask."

A metallic taste suffuses Jungkook's mouth when he bites down on the inside of his cheek to refrain himself from blurting out a retort that would blow out his and Taehyung's cover.

"Why don't you, then?" Hansol's voice is suave, impossible to define the gender of, their face covered by their coat's hood along with a mask shielding the lower part. "Are you perhaps frightened by the Kim son?"

A flame licks out of Seungwon mouth as he speaks, words roughened. "Careful how you address me, warlock."

Hansol folds an arm over their chest and bows. "Apologies, my lord."

"Keep an eye out for Taehyung. Let's get moving. Don't speak unless I've prompted you to. I've had enough of hearing you blabbering your mouths for the rest of the day."

Seungwon and his group resume their walk.

The warlock is at the back, their steps measured as they tilt their head this and that way, as if appreciating the beauty of the forest.

Their head suddenly snaps up.

Perhaps they weren't admiring as much as they were searching.

Their gaze fixates on Taehyung and Jungkook. Taehyung's body tenses in Jungkook's hands. Jungkook watches with bated breath, wondering if he should prepare to fight and ask Revna for help, however to his surprise, Hansol winks and trudges after the group.

The warlock does not speak a word, even after them and the rest of the group disappear through the vegetation.

Jungkook and Taehyung wait.

Taehyung is the first one to break the stillness. He drops down, deftly catching himself on his feet and hands. He makes a motion to trail after Seungwon.

"Taehyung," Jungkook calls out. Taehyung pauses and glances up at him. "Help me down," he mumbles, holding onto the tree trunk like a lifeline.

Taehyung looks unimpressed. "You can jump."

"So, it may baffle you, but I'm kind of scared of heights." Jungkook isn't about to faint or anything this drastic, but his vision does grow a little dizzy at the idea of jumping from so high.

"You flew with me twice."

"Yes, because I had no choice, and it was nice, plus I—" Jungkook pauses. Taehyung quirks a brow. "Nothing."

"You what?"

Jungkook mulls for a second over how absurd his response will sound in the current atmosphere between them. "When you flew me, I knew you'd catch me if I were to fall, and you did that one time with Woobin."

Taehyung's eyes narrow, his brow knitting. "You trust me too much."

Jungkook draws a contrite smile. "Maybe."

Taehyung clicks his tongue. His gaze darts between Jungkook and where Seungwon has left. "Can you be quiet?"

Jungkook bobs his head in confirmation. "As I said, I used to often be in the forest. I've learned how to hide to not be found by my handlers."

"You sure were easy to fo—" Taehyung falls quiet.

Jungkook snorts. "I know you've trailed after me during my nightly outings, Taehyung. Have you considered that I was easy to follow because I wanted it to be?" Taehyung, although stealthy, couldn't bypass Revna's alertness. Jungkook hadn't been bothered by the shadowing, quite the opposite, really, as Taehyung's presence had been an additional blanket of safety. "Can you help me down? Please?"

Taehyung heaves a deep sigh as he walks back to the tree. He extends his arms above his head and toward Jungkook.

"It's kinda high though," Jungkook mumbles, cautiously eyeing the ground.

“If you don’t jump, I’m leaving you here. I’m sure the local bears will love to know what humans taste like.”

Jungkook scowls at Taehyung.

But what if he lands badly and splits his head open on the sharp rock peeking out of the ground? That would be a terrible way to go, and certainly not befitting of Amaris’ future king.

“I’ll catch you,” Taehyung — *Softly? Exasperatedly?* — says. “Just jump.”

They lock eyes.

Jungkook drifts off the tree branch.

Taehyung catches him by the waist before the latter’s shoes can even hit the ground.

Jungkook eases the rapid pulsations of his heart by sliding his palms down Taehyung’s sturdy forearms, feeling the cotton of the soft pullover. “That wasn’t too bad,” he chuckles, tucking his embarrassment behind a grin.

“You don’t say,” Taehyung derides and wrenches his arms from Jungkook’s grasp. “Damn wuss.”

Jungkook smacks Taehyung’s arm.

“Come on. I don’t want to lose track of them.”

“The warlock saw us."

The two of them begin to stalk after the group.

Taehyung hums. “I don’t like this.”

“They didn’t say anything to Seungwon, though. I’m not saying we can trust them but…”

“They haven’t told him yet. *This* is the problem.”

“It could be a trap. Maybe they pretended to not see us. Is it prudent to follow them?”

“No, it isn't, but I still will because I need to know why the other asshole is sneaking around in Vanae. He’s acting more suspicious than you, and that’s saying something.”

“The difference between him and I, is that his motives definitely have an ill-intent, while mine don’t.”

“So you’ve said.”

As the minutes elapse, Taehyung won’t stop glancing at Jungkook.

Jungkook isn’t the kind of man to brag about anything — for the most part —, but he can’t suppress the prideful smile that paints his lips when he can catch onto how impressed Taehyung is by Jungkook's stealthiness.

“Do you have any idea of where we’re going?” Jungkook questions at some point.

Seungwon and his group are far ahead of them, quiet, moving figures in the forest.

“Aside from south-east of Vanae, no.”

“Is it in the same direction that we saw them fly one night?” Jungkook asks and Taehyung nods. “It’s strange… Why would they go there?”

“I don’t think it has anything to do with you. Unless you’re hiding more secrets."

Jungkook *is* withholding many secrets, but he can’t sensibly answer that to the distrustful dragonborn. “None related to Seungwon or dragonborns.”

An hour and a half passes that Jungkook spends walking by Taehyung’s side.

At first, Jungkook keeps his distance from Taehyung due to their recent terseness, but Taehyung is so *warm.* Jungkook can’t help but stay close to Taehyung to bask in the heat the dragonborn emanates. Taehyung contests with a glare and by stepping away from Jungkook. However Jungkook continues to naturally gyrate toward Taehyung. Thankfully, Jungkook’s stubbornness is the one to triumph — as it tends to.

The two of them stop when Seungwon’s group does.

“We’ll wait until they leave, then I’ll get close to see what it’s about,” Taehyung says, his shoulder brushing against Jungkook's. “It’s too risky to move now.”

“But remember what that Hansol warlock said about a veil? What if what they’re here to see is gone when they are?”

Taehyung curses. “We’ll go against the wind. Be. *Quiet*. I swear to the Elders, if you blow our cover, I’ll bury you ten feet under.”

“Yes sir,” Jungkook says with solemnity. “Shall we?”

The duo inches near the group. Taehyung guides them to have the wind at the front while Jungkook trails after him, walking every step Taehyung takes.

They reach a point where they’re close enough to observe but not be seen, shielded by the bushes and various plants.

Taehyung nods at a large tree and points upward. Jungkook can’t make that jump. The lower branch is feet above him. So he blankly stares at Taehyung, hoping that he can convey through his unwavering eyes how it’s *‘way too high’* and *‘but what if I do manage to grab the branch but it breaks under my weight and impales me?’*

Taehyung’s responding eye roll is so violent that Jungkook worries Taehyung’s eyeballs may get stuck in their socket. Taehyung swears under his breath, then, and without any warning, he swivels Jungkook around so that the latter faces away from him. Jungkook would usually scorn at being

manhandled this way, but said man’s hands are warm where they’re secured around his arms, their clamp not harsh even if authoritative.

A breath cascades down Jungkook’s neck, eliciting a shiver that is too fast for him to repress.

“I’ll fling you up to the tree branch,” Taehyung murmurs in Jungkook's, his palms drifting to cuff Jungkook’s waist. “Grab it.”

“Fling?”

Jungkook turns his head to voice out his affront. He may have miscalculated the reduced distance between their faces because their noses bump against each other. A muted *'Oh'* slips past his lips.

Taehyung dramatically recoils with a grimace.

Jungkook snides Taehyung with an impassive stare. “You are so, *so*, offending."

“I’m flinging you.”

And so Taehyung does.

And so Jungkook is flung high up in the air, thanking his reflexes when he grabs onto the branch and hoists himself on it. Taehyung is next to him a second later.

“Move forward. Need to be closer. Can’t see shit from here.”

“You’re such a prick,” Jungkook lowly hisses but does as asked, curious to see what Seungwon is planning. He stands and walks from branch to branch with unsteady steps. He pauses at a tree opened to a deserted area of dried ground and rocks. He sits down, startling when Taehyung appears on his right. Jungkook looks ahead once more.

The view has veered to an eerie one.

“What is that…”

Where the flat, continuous ground had once been, a plateau has taken its place, leading to a cliff. It’s more of a pit, with the bottom surrounded by mountains, but it isn’t what seizes Jungkook’s attention aside from the sudden appearance.

It’s what lays at the bottom of the cliff.

It takes some time for his mind to process the sight. It’s aided by the wafts that float in the air and are thrust toward Jungkook and Taehyung by the wind. The scent is the *exact same one* that Jungkook has smelled in the basement of Taehyung’s former home: that of a cemetery, and it could not be closer to the truth.

Plethora of bones litter the pit. More specifically, *dragon* skeletons, with the wing armatures, oversized spines, and skulls adorned with horns. Each bone is reflecting the light in some places and Jungkook understands why when he notes the lines of what seems to be silver drawn on them.

Jungkook’s head turns to survey Taehyung and assess what to do next.

Taehyung’s eyes are wide open, the pupils shaking as they dart across the bottom of the pit. His parted mouth releases a shaky exhale, punctuated by goosebumps dotting his nape where the hair stands on. His face scrunches, something pained and forlorn, lips then pressing into a trembling line.

Jungkook wants to ask so many questions, but he knows not to. Not now, when Taehyung is faced with a graveyard of his own kind.

Seungwon’s group has made its descent into the pit. They walk amongst the bones without a care in the world. Seungwon lifts a boot to kick a skull, dislodging it from the soil it had been embedded into.

Taehyung’s body lurches forward but Jungkook’s hand flies to grab his wrist.

“There’s nothing we can do at the moment,” Jungkook lowly says. Vitriol swims in Taehyung's eyes, and Jungkook would feel something akin to fear if he were at the end of it. “It’s too risky to confront them. We should leave, try to find out how— We should plan. Yoongi can help us. I’ll help too.”

Taehyung yanks his arm from Jungkook’s hold. He turns around and jumps down. Jungkook estimates the distance between himself and the ground to climb down on his own, but he does not have to. Taehyung extends his arms and makes an urgent motion inciting Jungkook to leap.

Not a word is exchanged during the walk back, the breeze as glacial as the silence surrounding them.

Jungkook comforts himself with the fact that this time, he isn't at the core of the churning turmoil. So he gives Taehyung some space, preferring to shiver rather than worsening Taehyung’s upset.

When they reach the house, Jungkook fetches the nixes. He peers at them, grazing the raven one. He turns around to face Taehyung.

“I don’t know what it was, nor why Seungwon is implicated in this… This graveyard of dragonborns, but… I’m here to help, even if you don’t believe me. I hope that with time, you’ll realize that my secrets aren’t threatening to you.”

Taehyung is silent. Unreadable. However he listens and watches Jungkook.

“And I’m sorry. Nothing about what we’ve seen seemed natural and I can’t imagine how—” Jungkook doesn’t finish his thought. "Yeah..."

Taehyung shakes his head, his pinched brows betraying his frustration. “You confuse me so damn much.”

Before Jungkook can answer, Taehyung turns into his dragon counterpart and flies off, vanishing into the sky.

Jungkook sighs as he enters the house. He doubts that Taehyung's family is one made of criminals or worse, but it still does not explain why their basement would smell like death, the exact same bitter scent that had been permeating the dragonborn graveyard in the pit.

There's also still the issue regarding the Kim family's aloofness toward Jungkook.

“I think they might find out about you and I,” Jungkook says to Revna. "I want them to. I may be able to help them."

He slumps against the headboard, his mind churning about all that has occurred.

“I doubt I can keep it hidden for much longer, and I don’t want to anyway. I… I want to be myself,” he murmurs to Revna, an ache growing near his heart. “We’ll wait a little while, and if Taehyung doesn’t confront me before the wedding, I will. He’ll know about our secret then, and so will we about his own, hopefully.”

Revna emits a noise of displeasure.

“If the conversation doesn’t go well, I’ll need you to bite him but not to a deadly point. Just enough to paralyze him with the pain so we can leave. I already prepared satchels with food, water and other necessities. I've buried them in the forest to pick up if we need to run away.”

Revna makes a series of worried noises that Jungkook shushes with a peck on her snout.

“I’ll be the token of trust we’ll give to Taehyung this time, okay? And then we’ll wait for him to give us his own. If he does not, we’ll leave.”

Jungkook has been out in the garden tonight again, and when he comes back from his stroll, his scent has a sour tinge to it. *Fear.* He looks aghast, so much so that he vehemently startles when Taehyung speaks.

“Is Seungwon out there?”

Jungkook’s head snaps toward Taehyung. “No. I was just— Thought I saw something.”

Taehyung is done, quite frankly.

He’s done with being in this stupid house. He’s done with going through this clusterfuck of a wedding and living with someone that he questions every single move and word of every damn minute that passes.

The plate Taehyung is holding clatters in the sink as he tosses it there. “See, I’ve done my research," Taehyung begins and rounds the kitchen island to stride toward Jungkook who does not budge from where he's standing. “And I know the basilisk, your ruby or book or whatever other object you have holds several arcanes. What I don’t understand, however, is why they have indecipherable, ancient arcanes.”

Jungkook steps back, his legs bumping against the coffee table. His tongue darts out to pass over his lower lip. He looks strangely poised and… at ease, regardless of the confrontation, as though he has been waiting for it.

“The wedding is next week.” Taehyung's gaze does not stray from Jungkook’s searching one. “I need my answers before that.”

“Or else?”

“Or I’m calling it off. I won’t wed a human who's hiding ancient arcanes that may be at the core of Elders know what considering your lineage.” Taehyung's fingers strain against the urge to snatch the ruby or the basilisk coiled around Jungkook’s right arm.

“I don’t want to call off the wedding.”

“Neither do I.” This union could be helpful in finding a cure for the plague, after all. “But you’re not leaving me many choices.”

“Because *you* are?” Jungkook scornfully chuckles. “I think my case is a lot more grievous than yours.”

“How?”

“Your worries about the arcanes you found are based on some neutral information that *you* are judging as ill-intentioned. Meanwhile, I’m worried that my betrothed and his family may be murderers in hiding."

"What?"

"I could smell death in your parents' basement.”

Taehyung’s nerves flare up. “And how, pray tell, do you know what death smells like?”

“As Amaris’ Prince, I’ve been tasked to visit cemeteries during commemorative days."

“This half truth doesn’t satisfy me.”

“Ah, really? Would you like to know what does not satisfy me, Taehyung?" Jungkook says with a cant of his head, slowly crossing the distance. "The fact that your family may be keeping quite literal skeletons in their closets. I recognized what I smelled in the basement. I *know* that scent. Want to hear something else I know? I think there’s a link between your basement and the pit of bones.”

Taehyung does not react, stopping himself just in time from displaying any sort of surprise.

“If you want to talk about secrets, perhaps you should start. Yours appears to be directly related to the death of your people that, no matter what you may believe, *I* have nothing to do with. I don’t know why those dragonborns died in that pit, and perhaps in your basement too. What I'm certain of, however, is that you must expect some kind of gain from our wedding that you won't obtain if we don't see it through. So…" Jungkook pauses, a foot away from Taehyung. “How about we both talk, *properly*, since you finally seem inclined to do so.”

Taehyung stares back at Jungkook. He nods once toward the living room, but Jungkook does not move right away, and neither does Taehyung.

“Speak.”

“You should—”

“I’m not playing any games.” The roulette of Taehyung’s arcane rolls and he doesn’t bother restraining it. Lightning flares and coils in-between his fingers, crawling up his right hand. “The only reason why I haven’t started a war yet is because I want to know. So speak, or I’ll find out the countenance of your ruby and basilisk myself even if I have to tear them from your corpse.”

Jungkook is impassive, his shoulders relaxed. The basilisk is strangely quiet too in spite of the threat. “Will you tell me more about your own secret?”

Taehyung can’t possibly share anything about the plague with Jungkook, but he can throw a couple half truths here and there.

“It’ll depend on what yours turns out to be."

Jungkook huffs a puff of air and fetches an oil lamp that he lightens. "We need to go outside and walk somewhere, so that I can show you.”

“Show me what?”

“My secret. I could tell you now, but you wouldn't believe me unless you see it with your own eyes.”

Taehyung slides on his cloak as Jungkook does with his own, the two of them soon stepping out of the house. “This better not be some kind of game, Jungkook.”

“Ehh, I think it’s one of the very few times you’ve addressed me by my first name."

When Taehyung passes by Jungkook, he halts next to him to lean closer and say “Let’s hope it’s not the last, yeah?”

“Implying you’ll kill me?” Jungkook says with a teasing lilt.

“Not just implying.”

“It’s true that subtlety isn’t your forte.”

Taehyung can’t formulate a retort. He's too tense to fall back into their usual bickering.

Jungkook leads them to the outskirts of the forest as the basilisk reverts inside the ruby, and the three of them trek deeper through the woods.

Taehyung is vigilant, mindful of every sound his ears catch, of every scent that reaches his nose. Jungkook could be leading him into a trap. He settles the roulette of his arcane on two aspects, ready to storm out at a twitch of his finger.

Taehyung breaks through the stillness a couple minutes later.

“How far are we supposed to go?”

“A forty minute walk?"

“Huh?”

“It’s kinda far. Although it’ll be faster if you fly us there.”

“And where the hell is ‘there’?”

“Will you fly us?”

“We can stop here and finish the rest of the route on foot,” Jungkook announces twenty minutes later, sitting on Taehyung’s talon. “It’s close by.”

Taehyung dives down. He lands on the ground and allows Jungkook to climb off his palm afterwards. “What is ‘it’?” He asks after shifting back to his human self, his question received with a half smile.

“You’ll see.”

The forest here is familiar. The area is one that Taehyung has explored quite often in his childhood.

Surprisingly enough, Jungkook also seems to know his way around. The oil lamp he's holding barely helps in fighting off the darkness, yet Jungkook still trudges with a certain confidence, avoiding a fallen trunk and finding paths amidst the trees.

Taehyung changes his arcane to summon his fire that wraps one of his hands to illuminate their walk a tad more brightly. His palms clam up, his chest tight with nervousness. Even his fire doesn’t abate the shudders that run down his spine nor the cold that seems to cling onto his bones.

The more their trip extends, the more his wariness grows.

“How far?”

“We’re there, actually.”

They arrive on the top of a cliff, the place covered in grass that shines with the ambient humidity and the moonlight cascading on them.

Taehyung glances around, and he freezes when he realizes what is in front of him.

The tombstone is beautiful, with a dragon above it sculpted in a stone.

Taehyung averts his gaze from it.

“You better tell me why we’re in front of this grave,” Taehyung rasps, not bothering to repress the edge clipping his voice.

Jungkook turns to face Taehyung. His lips press together. His folded hands drift behind his back. The motion isn’t fast enough for Taehyung to not notice the trembles in Jungkook’s fingers, nor the way the knuckles turn white as they entangle.

Jungkook exhales.

His gaze is sharp when it fixes on Taehyung’s.

“What do you think my secret is?”

“The ruby or basilisk has ancient arcanes, or another object of yours does. Maybe your book. I have no fucking clue on how you got your hands on something like that in the first place, but I’m assuming you have to thank your parents that are known to plunder.”

Jungkook nods. His throat clicks when he swallows. “I’m giving you a token of trust with this, Taehyung."

“Sure.”

“I mean it.” Jungkook’s timber is as cold as steel, but it’s dampened by the coarseness in his words, and how his voice quietens the more he speaks. “Only Yoongi and Namjoon know about this. Aside from Revna, this is the most important aspect of my life I'm about to share with you."

If Jungkook isn’t lying, Seohyung and Sungmin may not be privy to the countenance of Jungkook's secret. It's reassuring, for some reasons.

So Taehyung nods.

“You’re right. Partially,” Jungkook carries on. His hands fiddle with the buttons of his fluffy winter coat, unfastening them one by one. He shuffles off the garment to fold and drape it on the ground. “I know what the ancient arcanes you speak of are, and—” He blows a puff of air as he looks up at the night sky. He cards a hand through his locks, his head lolling down, then he cups the side of his throat to brush his thumbs up and down.

Taehyung can't remember a time where he has seen the Prince’s impeccable composure crumble so openly.

“Revna can control one of them.”

“Which one?”

“Transmutation.”

Taehyung wants to bark out a childish *‘I fucking knew it!* because he *did*, however he opts to remain guarded and says “She can only control one ancient arcane?”

“As far as I know, yes. What do you— What did you find out, exactly, and how?”

“I’m fairly certain you recognized your friend’s arcanic book, didn’t you?” Taehyung says and Jungkook nods.

"But I didn't get to ask Yoongi about it. He wasn't at the citadel when I visited."

“Doesn't matter. This is the how, the rest is semantics. As for what I found out…” He trails off and slides a hand under his cloak to rummage through the inside pocket. He brandishes a note between two fingers. “This will answer your question. I’m not walking a single step forward,” he adds when Jungkook does not move.

Jungkook rolls his eyes but crosses the distance nonetheless, rubbing his palms up and down his arms. His red pullover must do little against the biting cold.

Taehyung waits until Jungkook is a foot or two away to extend the paper. Jungkook takes it and Taehyung is careful to not let their fingers touch.

Just in case.

Jungkook unfolds the note and reads the list of information the ring had scanned a while ago. “What are the first seven arcanes? They’re not written there.”

“None related to you."

Jungkook glances up at him, his curiosity evident. “Number eight and eleven are related to Revna, among other things. The thirteenth must be the transmutation arcane. I told you about her venom already, and the dimension manipulation is what allows the ruby to be entered. It probably also includes the inside of the ruby.”

“What about the ink manipulation? How come she can use this like that warlock of yours?”

“It’s… It’s correlated to my secret, and no, I won’t tell you in what way yet. It’s personal and isn’t solely about me.” Jungkook's brows furrow. “Why are there five ancient arcanes?”

Taehyung can’t repress the incredulous laugh that escapes his mouth. “You’re asking *me?* ”

“Yes, because out of those five ancient arcanes, one is transmutation, one more will be shown to you now. The others are unknown to me. Are they yours?”

Taehyung snatches the paper from Jungkook. “Don’t fucking lie to me. I don’t have any ancient arcane.”

Revna materializes out of the ruby and slides down Jungkook’s leg to loosely curl up on his coat. “Let’s just— It doesn’t matter for now.”

Jungkook swivels around and makes his way toward the tombstone where he pauses next to. He tugs the sleeves of his pullover up to his elbows. Revna raises her head, her eyes born onto Taehyung.

Taehyung knows a guarding dog — or rather basilisk — when he sees one, and he smothers his fire to slot his arcane back on the lightning aspect that he mingles with another one.

“I need you to not freak out, or if you *do* freak out, don’t attack me nor what you’ll see,” Jungkook starts with a glance at Taehyung.

Taehyung wonders if he has been correct, after all. If Jungkook has another ‘familiar’, however much more lethal than the damn reptile glaring at Taehyung — a stark contrast from how friendly the snake has been with everyone thus far, including Taehyung.

“I promise it’s nothing bad, at least not here, although it can be dangerous depending on… Depending on several different variables, and I guess it can be scary for those unfamiliar with this and—”

“Get on with it,” Taehyung cuts, too jittery for any inane ramble.

“I’m giving a token of trust with this, Taehyung.”

Jungkook had sounded genuine, and it’s with this thought in mind that Taehyung hands a tenth of his own token and watches.

Jungkook turns to face the tombstone. His right hand fiddles with the ruby while his left one hovers in the air and drifts toward the dragon sculpture. His movements are slow, the pulp of his fingers grazing the dragon’s talon with gentleness. They sprawl over the stone, his palm soon fully resting atop the tombstone.

A sudden surge of wind bellows through the area. It pushes Taehyung’s hair back and ruffles his clothes. His cloak erratically whirls behind him.

He has to plant his boots into the ground to steady his stance and not be blown away by the billowing gusts. He raises an arm to shield his face from the leaves, twigs and pieces of dry soil the wind reaps in its path. Taehyung worries for a second that he might be swept off his feet, or that the trees may be uprooted as the trunks groan while their crowns whistle and whine.

Taehyung doesn’t notice it at first, the barely noticeable change amidst the darkness.

The wind *tints.* The colorless storm darkens and *darkens*, soon veering into raven curtains. They’re shapeless, aimlessly snapping in haphazard directions around the clearing, as though unable to focus on anything.

Then, they all converge to one place, or rather person: Jungkook.

The wind that looks more and more like smokey, jet black flames, narrows into thin ribbons. They lace around Jungkook’s arms and neck in an ever moving piece of garment. The area is calm now that the storm has found a new home in Jungkook.

Taehyung lowers his arms. His eyes prickle. He refuses to blink. He does not want to miss anything.

And so Taehyung sees them amidst the black wind: the drawings — *tattoos* — that cover Jungkook’s forearms and tip of the fingers. The back of Jungkook’s hands appear to each have a sigil on them that Taehyung can’t decipher. The symbols are surrounded by curved, black lines that meet and trail next to each other in intricate yet cohesive patterns. They go as far as up the elbow and probably higher, Taehyung thinks when his eyes dart up.

Another sigil is painted at the front of Jungkook’s throat, this one made of three crossing circles. The center of this sigil is carmine, and there's an equally red line that traces down Jungkook’s throat, becoming darker the lower it is until it disappears underneath the pullover. This three circle sigil soon expands to cover the expanse of Jungkook’s neck. It stops where the jaw begins.

The dark wind unravels from Jungkook’s body to sway around him, like wavering flames held in suspension, awaiting *something*.

When Jungkook speaks, his voice is hoarser than usual, tongue curled around flames. It resounds between Taehyung’s ears, and it’s strange, the way it feels as though the words are spoken directly inside Taehyung’s brain rather than out loud.

“*Respira, anima noctis*.”

The wind shoots toward the tombstone.

It touches the stone here and there and everywhere, like probing fingers searching for an entry through a door. It must eventually find it because the wind gathers into an opaque band that enters the tombstone, as though siphoned inside it.

Everything is uncannily quiet around Taehyung.

Not a single sound or rustle of leaves can be heard.

Jungkook is peering at the grave, and Taehyung had not realized up til now the way Jungkook’s eyes are entirely black, from the pupil to the iris to the sclera.

A shudder creeps down Taehyung’s spine. It flares a tide of goosebumps in its wake. He makes a move to step backward, however he pauses halfway through the motion at the smile that curves Jungkook’s lips, kind yet frightening.

A familiar voice erupts in the quietude.

One Taehyung hasn’t heard in years.

“You’re back!”

A figure materializes out of thin air next to the gravestone.

The kid looks like himself, like how Taehyung had last seen him, but also not.

The body is ethereal. Translucent. Its color is of a bright blue that casts a light on the tombstone and Jungkook. Taehyung’s brain slowly remarks that he can see the grass and trees through the kid that dashes toward Jungkook.

Taehyung knows the kid.

Knew him.

It’s the child that he used to take care of years ago before a tragedy had befallen upon him. The ten years old kid, supposed to be dead, buried beneath the tombstone, is excitedly chatting away while engulfed in Jungkook’s arms.

Tremors run through Taehyung’s limbs. He can't move, let alone utter a single word. His gaze flickers on Jungkook, meeting two pools of unreadable black.

Taehyung mutely watches as Jungkook frees himself from Kija to crouch in front of the kid.

Jungkook is grinning. Kija is too, who does not seem scared or disorientated.

“You said you’d be here last night but you weren’t,” Kija complains through a pout that emits a smoke puff of raven flame. He folds his arms as he used to do whenever he’d unconsciously pick up some of Taehyung’s habits.

Jungkook ruffles Kija's hair who frantically swings his arms around to dislodge the hand tousling his strands, and it's odd because Taehyung expects Jungkook's fingers to go through Kija's head, yet they don't. "I'm sorry. I couldn't visit because I was busy."

"Because of Tae? I love Taetae, but he can be mean."

"He can be… a devil, that's for sure."

Kija sighs. "I miss him."

Jungkook rests a finger on Kija's jaw. Taehyung knows because he can see it through Kija's chin, just like he can see how Jungkook turns Kija's head in Taehyung's direction.

Taehyung and Kija's eyes lock together.

Taehyung's mouth parts open. Kija's does too, his eyes widening. The prickling in Taehyung's eyes stings as tears well up in them.

"Tae!" Kija runs toward Taehyung, his blue, crystalline form racing across the grass.

A lump swells in Taehyung's throat. He falls on his knees and opens his arms to welcome the boy in the hug. However Taehyung's hands meet air when he tries to hug Kija, closing in around nothing. "No… No no no. Why—" Taehyung cups Kija's face. He *wants* to, but akin to a second ago, his fingers traverse the head.

"Oh, I forgot," Kija says with a sheepish smile and twists his head to peer at Jungkook who has joined them.

"You should wait next time," Jungkook chuckles. The raven wind — flames? — swirls out of Jungkook's mouth that he forms into a sphere and feeds to Kija.

"Sorryyy."

"You're good to go now."

Kija's body is less transparent now, harder to see through yet still as arctic blue and radiant.

When Kija throws himself in Taehyung's embrace, this time Taehyung can feel the small body secured between his arms. The sensation is strange, like holding solid, cold air. "By the Elders," Taehyung murmurs against Kija's crown, his throat too clogged up to speak any higher. "Fucking hell."

Kija snorts, his tiny hands gripping at the back of Taehyung's cloak as he buries his face in Taehyung's neck. "You cursed."

Taehyung releases his hold of the boy to frantically pat Kija's arms and shoulders, then the cheeks and top of the head. The soft edges of Kija's form blur, but he can still see Kija, *talk to him.* "Hey," Taehyung says through trembling lips, but he has to press the back of his hand against his mouth to muffle a sob. "Fuck, I can't—"

"You curse a lot," Kija scolds with a frown but he grabs one of Taehyung's hands to hold it, and Taehyung's fingers enveloping Kija's smaller blue ones.

“He’s surprisingly polite right now. I was expecting more swears,” Jungkook chips in.

Kija launches himself into an old tale of how his mother had once grounded Taehyung for cursing too much. It both breaks Taehyung’s hearts and expunges the sliver of doubts left in his mind about how Jungkook could be fabricating what is happening.

Taehyung stares at the boy, then at Jungkook.

He’s torn between happiness and regret, unsure on whether to be confused about what is transpiring, or simply not giving it a care for as long as he can hold Kija in his arms again.

“Taetae, you look funny,” Kija laughs and pinches Taehyung’s cheeks with his free hand. “Where are your wings?” Kija gasps when Taehyung summons his wings. “Wow… They’ve grown a *lot*. What about your dragon form? Is it bigger too?”

Taehyung nods with a small smile before withdrawing his wings. He gently squeezes Kija’s hand that is neither warm nor cold, but it provides an anchor Taehyung clings onto.

“How big? This big?” Kija spreads his arms, and when Taehyung shakes his head, Kija exclaims “More?! Say, say, more than Junnie? Junnie is sooo huge. Last time I saw him he was, like, bigger than the forest,” Kija blurts out, his exaggeration prompting a wet chuckle out of Taehyung. “What about your breaths? Do you have more? Can you show me?”

Taehyung opens his mouth to answer; tell and show Kija anything he wants; but nothing comes out of it, long enough for a silence to stretch between them.

“Hey, Kija,” Jungkook starts and crouches by his side, “do you want to look for some nixes while I speak with Taehyung for a bit? I have a few things to explain to him. He’s a little lost right now.”

“Oh! Yes,” Kija exclaims and enthusiastically sways his and Taehyung’s hands. “I remember I saw one yesterday but I was too tired to take it.”

“You can now. I gave you a lot of energy that will last for days,” Jungkook smiles.

When Kija drops Taehyung’s hand, Taehyung immediately swathes the boy in a hug again. He rests a palm at the back of Kija’s head, holding him tighter than before.

“Taetae,” Kija whines against Taehyung’s shoulders. “You’re squeezing me.”

“I am,” Taehyung rasps. “I am. By the Elders, you’re here. I can hug you again,” he says, his voice sounding more like a whine. “You’re not— You’re supposed to be—”

Taehyung's teeth click shut.

“I know I’m dead, it’s okay,” Kija grins, and it’s a little backward how he’s the one patting Taehyung’s back to comfort him. “It’s pretty fun.”

“Fun?” Taehyung breaks the hug to watch the boy. “How can it be…”

“I scare people in the forest. Some of them scream so loud, it’s funny,” Kija snickers. “I think one peed his pants one day.”

“I don’t understand,” Taehyung murmurs to himself but Jungkook must have heard him because he speaks again.

“Here.” Jungkook hands Kija a large pouch that the boy takes. “You can put the nixes in there.”

“Okay! I’ll be back fast, don’t go, please,” Kija adds through pursed lips while tugging onto Taehyung’s sleeve.

Taehyung nods, mustering a faint curve of his lips. He ruffles Kija’s hair. “I won’t.”

Kija grumbles about how tired he is that everyone is messing up his hair. Then, after pecking Jungkook’s cheek and giving Taehyung another embrace, Kija runs off, his translucent form disappearing within the forest.

Taehyung’s body and soul as a whole feel weak. He fully sits down, drawing his legs up to prop his arms on his knees. The tears he had been holding back are hot on his cold skin now, his breath a mess of aborted exhales he tries to fruitlessly contain. “Why… What— What is going on?”

Jungkook kneels on the ground in front of Taehyung, folding his legs under him. His eyes are unnerving as they dart on Taehyung before jumping away, still entirely black and framed by the long eyelashes that draw faint shadows on the apple of his cheeks. The moonlight cascades down Jungkook's form, casting a pale, snowy veil on his skin that clashes with the raven swirls and lines of his tattoos.

The sight, as eerie and disconcerting as it is, is impossibly riveting.

“This is simple, but also quite complicated,” Jungkook starts and lowers his gaze.

Taehyung yanks on the sleeves of his top to wipe his eyes with the heel of his palms. There’s a dull ache between his eyes, a telltale sign of a migraine rearing its ugly head. He listens to the basilisk slither across the grass who drapes over Jungkook’s thighs. “Is this her doing?”

Jungkook shakes his head. He's still evading Taehyung's eyes.

Taehyung had known the answer to this query, but he had to voice it out before asking his next question.

“Then…”

Taehyung watches the sigil on the back of Jungkook’s left hand, and the second one adorning the right hand.

“You’re not human.”

Jungkook's head lifts to survey Taehyung. With a crooked smile, he says “Depends on what you qualify as human.”

Taehyung nods. He doesn’t know why but he does anyway, at a loss for words. “Explain, please.”

Jungkook inhales and heaves a deep sigh. The sigil of three circles moves when his Adam’s apple bobs up and down.

“I’m a warlock,” he murmurs, “and a necromancer.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m curious, had you figured out what Jungkook’s secret was or did you have no idea? 👀 I scattered a few smol, tiny hints here and there 🤔 Balancing them to perhaps guide you or give you some ideas of what Jungkook’s secret could be without making it too obvious was so difficult, and in the end the hints may have been wayyy too subtle T_T

Definition of ‘phantosmia’ stolen from Google: *An olfactory hallucination (phantosmia) makes you detect smells that aren't really there in your environment. The odors you notice in phantosmia are different from person to person and may be foul or pleasant.*

I thought it’d be fun to have that as the title of this chapter considering that Jungkook’s suspicions of Taehyung’s family lessens the more he discovers new smells XD The word also sounds like ‘phantoms’ a bit which I really like and found very fitting for what happens at the end of this chapter hehe, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, I had a blast writing it and the 'revelation' (I also teared up because I'm weak) 🤍 PS: the wedding is approaching 👀🤍

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's Visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH7.

Jungkook's neck tattoos/sigil
Jungkook's hands and arms tattoos/sigils
Jungkook's eyes
What a lost soul looks like in general

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook, Taehyung and Kija made by taeoceans
❧ A moodboard of Jungkook made by Little_Bunny07

Chapter 8: A Night's Token

Chapter Summary

> As Taehyung learns a little more about Jungkook, more questions arise than they are answered. Meanwhile, the wedding approaches, the last preparations and meeting with the Queen arriving.

Chapter Notes

> Enjoy this chapter hehe 👀🤍
>
> ❧ Twitter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm a warlock," Jungkook murmurs, "and a necromancer."

Taehyung doesn't know what revelation he had been waiting for all this time, yet the one Jungkook provides blows at any theory Taehyung may have created.

Taehyung had not even entertained the idea that Jungkook could be anything other than a regular human, and the one time his mind had conjured the idea of Jungkook being more than that, Taehyung had made a fool of himself and ruined Jungkook's botany book.

"I know this is—" Jungkook pauses as Revna withdraws in the ruby. His and Taehyung's gazes meet. "I know this is a lot to take in at once, and that you must have a lot of questions to ask, not only due to me being a warlock, but also because of the countenance of my arcane."

Necromancy *had* been on the list of five arcanes Taehyung and Jimin had made a few days ago. Taehyung had thought it wise to add it, as they had found no reason to eliminate it. Jimin had agreed. However neither of them had expected for the answer to be right in front of their eyes, written on a meager piece of parchment.

"You don't hold humans near your heart. I assume it is the same for warlocks, but I hope that my arcane being… Being what it is won't become a problem."

"I haven't heard about necromancy *once* in my life aside from in the books I've read about the Arcane, but even then it was in passing because of how ancient and supposedly extinct necromancy is," Taehyung says, the word foreign on his tongue. "It's gone from everyone's mind, Jungkook, but you— This is— Necromancy isn't supposed to *exist*. It shouldn't—"

“Because it goes against life itself? Because it’s deeply linked to death that most people are afraid of and do not understand? Or perhaps it’s because necromancy is a vile, inhuman arcane,” Jungkook says; parrots with heavy contempt, really, as he may have been targeted by those same remarks in the past.

It brings forth a question in Taehyung’s mind. “Seohyung and Sungmin know?”

Jungkook refutes with a shake of his head. He shifts on his spot to grab the coat from under him and slide it on his shoulders. He closes the coat tighter around himself as a shiver racks through him. “I need it to remain this way.”

“Can’t imagine they’d react well if they’re aware of this."

“I probably wouldn’t be alive anymore,” Jungkook agrees with a resigned levity.

Taehyung summons his fire on his hands in a makeshift source of warmth and luminosity.

There’s a weight in Taehyung’s chest, one that has been there for years but had gone quiet as time had gone by, and as memories had faded away. It coalesces with this simmering, familiar guilt. Taehyung has never forgotten its existence, and he has never really healed from it either, but he has learned to not torture himself every day over what had occurred.

However now, confronted with the core of those churning remorse, the *‘What if…’* , *‘I should have…’* and *‘If I hadn’t…’* mangle his mind.

“Is this why you were leaving every night?”

“I was exploring the forest from the beginning. I didn't lie to you. I was also looking for lost souls, but I couldn’t find any until I stumbled on Kija.”

“When did you stumble on him?”

“When we were flying to Vanae’s market. I sensed a soul and saw it running through the forest. I couldn’t tell who it was nor could I start any communication with them since you were surveying me, but when I went outside later that night, I found Kija near your home.” Jungkook’s hands, still painted in those black tattoos, peek from underneath the coat to hover the flames flickering out of Taehyung’s palm. “He’s been roaming a lot around your house, actually. He never walks up to it, but he’s close, more often than not.”

Taehyung’s thoughts can't seem to wrap around the staggering knowledge he has acquired tonight. He has never believed in ghosts as much as their existences have simply never crossed his mind, so all that Jungkook is sharing reads like a crazed, unbelievable fable his mind has conjured. Taehyung expects himself to wake up from a particularly cruel nightmare, but the prickles of pain that flare in his palm when his nails sink into the skin tell him otherwise.

“How does it work?” Taehyung asks after a beat of silence. “You can manipulate death?”

“For starters, what is said in books is, for the most part, entirely wrong, and biased." Jungkook’s dark eyes still never really meet Taehyung’s. “At least in my case, since I’ve never met another necromancer.”

“Because their arcane is not allowed to exist anymore,” Taehyung reiterates and it’s not out of spite, but rather out of this dizzying bewilderment.

“I know, yet here I am.”

Yet here he is.

“I can’t resurrect people, if this is what you meant by manipulating death. I can’t steal the soul of an alive person and eat it to become immortal and then expunge the world either,” Jungkook explains with a little tug at the corner of his mouth. “I can’t do most of the things described in books about necromancy.”

“Then what can you do?”

“I can speak to the dead and help their souls pass. That’s all.”

Pass?

“By ‘pass’, I mean— I’m not sure where they go, if there’s a heaven, a limbo, or a place akin to that. I don’t know if souls simply disappear into nothing or something else, if they’re reincarnated, but, uhm… I can help them find peace and…” Jungkook traces the tattoos adorning his index, trailing up to the sigil at the back of his left hand. “I call it ‘sleep’, because it's kinder than saying that I help them die again. If this is what happens, because, again, I'm not certain. My fire absorbs the souls, and then makes them pass. I can feel their fulfillment when I do so.”

“You can manipulate dead souls.”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Is this what those sigils mean?”

“I think so? I've never found any information about these.” Jungkook raises a hand to his throat where the three circles sigil is drawn. “I assume this one is about speech, considering the placement, but other than that, I have no idea about their actual meaning.”

“You should search about it." The ‘we’ is on the tip of Taehyung tongue, too reticent to be spoken yet.

“I know, but I couldn’t at the citadel. Yoongi did try to find some information but it was always in vain.”

“You can research now.” Taehyung glances up. His and Jungkook’s gaze meet for the first time in the past minute. “Are you able to— As in, can you… I have so many questions but I don’t know where to start and Kija is— Why is he here? Why hasn’t he passed?”

“Although some are content to continue existing in our realm, even if unseen by most. However I believe some other souls remain behind because they have unfinished business."

“Unfinished business?”

“Some souls want to retrieve an object, or on the contrary leave something behind for their loved ones. Others want to speak to a family member or a lover for one last time. There are as many reasons as there are souls. For a few of them, it’s more complicated because some souls don’t know

why they haven't passed, which is when I can enter to help them. And for a few more, what they want is very, very, *very* difficult to achieve. Sometimes impossible, and so they're trapped here, unable to pass."

What if Kija's falls in that last category?

However Taehyung can't think of any reason why Kija would feel compelled to stay behind. Perhaps the boy is afraid of being left alone?

"There was once an old king who adamantly refused to pass before his nemesis died," Jungkook carries on, a smile floating on his lips. "He had told me he had been waiting for two decades to watch his rival die. He then waited for a third decade, however I was around for this last one."

"Did he pass?"

"Yes."

"Then his nemesis died."

"The other king had eventually died from old age, yes. Want to know what the waiting king told me before sleeping?" Jungkook says and Taehyung nods. "I still remember word for word. He had said: *'In spite of everything, my hatred for him was the only constant in my life.* He *was. He was the only thing I knew would be there and stay no matter what. Now that he's gone, I feel empty, and lonely.'* "

"He sounded…"

"In love?" Jungkook chuckles. "Yeah, I thought the same, and he *had* fallen in love with the man he hated more than death itself. Denial is a curious thing. It can make you blind to what is obvious to most."

Taehyung distractedly plucks at strands of grass. "You helped this king pass, then? Is it physical or more of a mental thing?"

"No, he passed on his own, and it depends," Jungkook shrugs. "Some souls are too weak to pass on their own, and this is when I can use my arcane to give them the energy to move on, so to speak."

Jungkook sounds unsure of himself, and Taehyung can only imagine that most of what Jungkook has learned regarding his arcane is born from an experience limited to his own.

"How I understand it, is that souls need a certain amount of energy to pass," Jungkook says. "They can obtain this energy by solving what is troubling them, or I can give it to them. I've always viewed my arcane as flames, and souls as embers that need to be rekindled."

Jungkook calls forth the same black ribbons that undulate and curl around his arm. Taehyung's own hand is enveloped in the fire he had summoned, and the dichotomy of Jungkook's ebony flames to Taehyung's golden ones is strangely compelling.

"Is this what you've done with Kija? I wanted to hug him at first, but it didn't let me."

"Souls can touch people and their surroundings depending on how long they've been here, how much energy they have, if I'm there to help or not. I suppose that an arcanic land plays its part as well. It varies a lot. It's quite complex. And the thing is, some souls are incredibly powerful and can

manifest themselves to you or anyone else and touch anything they want on their own, most likely because they draw their strength from their own essence, so to speak. I've even seen a few that still had access to their arcane. As for Kija, his soul isn't strong enough to be able to touch without a boost from my flames."

"Why is he—" Taehyung hunches forward, elbows propped on his legs to press the heel of his palms against his stinging eyes. "Why hasn't he passed? He should be peaceful, not— Not lost in the forest, and lonely. He doesn't deserve that."

"He doesn't know why he's still here, neither do I. I've been trying to figure it out, but it's complicated."

"Something is holding him back either way."

"I believe so, yes."

The guilt is mind-numbing and suffocating.

If Taehyung had been more attentive that one day—

"Kija hasn't told me what happened to him, and I never ask," Jungkook starts, "but he loves you a lot. He doesn't speak much about people he knew, partially because he doesn't recall a lot, but the rare times he mentions someone of his past, it's you. Every few memories he shared with me always involved you."

"Is it bad for a soul to stay behind?" Taehyung chooses to say. He doesn't want to mull over Jungkook's admission, not now or ever when, if someone does not deserve to be remembered by Kija, it's Taehyung.

"I don't know, I'm sorry. I keep saying this but there truly isn't much that I'm certain of," Jungkook mumbles, rubbing his palms up and down his thighs, the flames gone. "It depends, I suppose. I don't think a soul staying has any consequence on them considering that they've died already, but it could become precarious in regard to the soul's personality. Just like living people, some souls have ill-intent and wish to harm."

"Then what happens if Kija doesn't leave? Has he— Does he relive his death? Does he feel pain or cold or hunger?"

"Souls can't feel hunger or thirst."

The omissions aren't lost on Taehyung.

"So Kija—" Taehyung tastes blood when he gnaws on the inside of his cheek. "Kija could suffer. *Again*. He could already be right no—"

"He's not."

"And how the fuck would you know?"

"Because I asked him."

Taehyung studies Jungkook, looking for any sign of a lie.

“He’s not in pain. When he's not excited to be talking to someone, he's tired. He’s already dead, Taehyung. Not much worse than that can happen.”

That you know of, Taehyung does not say out loud. However Jungkook's words, albeit blunt, help abate the gnawing in Taehyung’s chest.

“As I said, all the knowledge I have about necromancy stems from me and my own arcane, so I could be wrong about many things, but… Yeah.”

“This is fucking insane. Do you realize how insane everything you’ve told me is? You’re a necromancer."

“I’m impressed you’re not freaking out more.”

“You and I both. I’m just—” *Upset.* “Kija should pass. He should have his peace.”

“He should, but we can't force him to do so. Although, now that you know he’s here, you could help me figure out what it is that may be delaying his passing.”

Taehyung emits a pained laugh. “There’s nothing *I* could do to help him. Not me. I’d only make things worse than—”

“I found them!”

Kija’s translucent form dashes through the trees and toward Jungkook. He’s sporting a bright grin, the first couple of nixes' bells peeking out from the pouch Jungkook had given to the boy. Jungkook turns to peer at Kija and he *‘Ooh’* s when the latter plops down next to him.

“I got three stems,” Kija exclaims. “Nixes are so cool. Did you know the black ones are for dragonborns?”

“I do, Taehyung told me,” Jungkook smiles.

“Me too,” Kija snickers, the same one Taehyung has been acquainted with thousands of times in the past, and as it usually would be, the sound is trailed by a cheerful jest. “Taetae’s such a nerd. He knows everything about plants. Me and Jiminie always make fun of him.”

Taehyung can’t reciprocate the playfulness no matter how much he wants to. He can only stare at Kija who must feel the gaze on him because he looks at Taehyung.

Kija’s grin vanishes as he deflates. “Taetae? Are you okay?”

Taehyung does not reply to the query. Instead, he extends his arms and says “Come here, kiddo.”

Kija, who would commonly scowl at being referred to as a kid, wordlessly shuffles to sit sideways on Taehyung’s crossed legs. “Taetae, you look sad.”

“Because I am,” Taehyung admits, unable to lie to the boy.

“Why?”

Taehyung’s throat struggles to work around the lump clogging it. His words are hoarse when spoken, more of a whispered plea.

"I'm sorry."

Taehyung does not get to say more, to try and explain that if he could change anything about the past no matter the cost, he would do so without an ounce of doubt.

Kija's body suddenly freezes.

Then, he becomes limp in Taehyung's arm, his head lolled forward.

With an arm around the boy's back to support him, Taehyung scrambles to lift Kija's head. He tilts the boy's head back and behind the closed lids, he can see how the eyes wildly dart around.

Jungkook crosses the foot separating him from Taehyung and Kija. He places a palm on Kija's crown. He doesn't look concerned by the abrupt unconsciousness.

"What's— What's happening? What the fuck have you—"

"He's remembering. He's trying to," Jungkook murmurs, brushing the haphazard strands of hair from Kija's forehead. "He couldn't before."

Taehyung is the one to still this time. He shakes his head and cradles Kija's against his chest. "Don't. Don't let him remember. He shouldn't— Just wake him up. You can do that right? Jungkook. Wake him up. Wake him up, please."

"I think he needs to remember to find his peace, Taehyung."

Taehyung does not plead with humans, however he does once more, uncaring of his pride. " *Please.* We can't— Please."

Jungkook smiles, the motion as gentle as the way he cups Kija's face. "Hey," he says, and Taehyung only notices now the way Kija's eyes flutter open. "You're back with us."

"I remember now," Kija mumbles, a frown etching his face.

And the memories assault Taehyung's mind.

"But Tae!"

"I said no. You can go out later. You're supposed to be finishing your homework today while I babysit you."

"I'm ten. I'm not a baby."

"Yes you are, you big baby," Taehyung teases. Kija scowls. "Only babies whine when they're told to do their homework."

"Then you're a baby too 'cause you hate doing your homework too."

Taehyung deftly ignores the well aimed jab. “Do your homework while I'm cooking lunch."

Kija huffs and rolls his eyes. “You’re boring.”

“I’m not boring,” Taehyung says through pursed lips.

“You’re more boring than homework and homework is reaaally boring.”

Taehyung, with his wings that he always keeps out in his human form, taps the top of Kija’s head. “Go to your bedroom and finish your homework. Then we can go out to…”

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Taehyung knocks on the bedroom door.

“Kija? Can I come in?”

No response arrives. Taehyung rattles his knuckles a second time.

“Kija?”

It’s too quiet there. The boy has a tendency to run off whenever he’s tasked with a chore, and so Taehyung’s eyes narrow in suspicion.

“Kija, I’m opening the door, and I swear to the Elders if you—”

Taehyung half expects the bedroom to be empty, and when he sees that it is indeed devoid of the presence of a certain little devil, the window wide open, irritation flares in him. “This kid… Kija! You better get your ass over here! I told you…”

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Taehyung has scoured every single place and spot in the forest that Kija runs off to whenever he escapes the house, even at the tree house he and Jimin had built for the boy. The field of nixes, the river, or the lake further south are also empty.

Kija is nowhere to be found.

The more the minutes elapse, the more the anger is slowly replaced by an ever growing dread.

“Kija! Kija, where are you?!”

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“Taehyung, calm down. I don’t unders—”

“I can’t find Kija! I was making his lunch and I told him to do his homework but you know how he is with them and I went to check up on him not even five minutes later because I had a feeling he’d run off and now he’s gone and I don’t know—”

“Son.” Dahee cups Taehyung’s cheeks. “I’m sure he’s fine. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s fallen asleep.”

“Let us look for him,” Junhyun says and Dahee nods. “Go with your mother, Taehyung. I will find Kija’s parents and explain the situation to them.”

“Where have you looked already? We must…”

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Taehyung is flying above a ravine, its river dry. His gaze scrutinizes every nook and crannies.

Soon, an oddity catches his attention.

It’s on the edge of the cliff, wedged between a fissure. The cap is dirtied from soil but not just. A red substance is splattered on the fabric, mirrored on the rocks surrounding it.

Taehyung’s mind can’t really comprehend what he’s seeing as he hovers in the air.

He glances down.

There’s something at the bottom of the ravine.

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Taehyung has never experienced a pain as strong as the one that tears his heart asunder.

The tears silently trickle down his cheeks while Kija’s mother deposits on the grass the lifeless body of her son, the wings broken.

Taehyung’s legs can’t hold him up anymore as he falls to his knees. His fingers curl, digging into the soil, and he watches Naeun and Joonho cry, Naeun cradling her son’s face while Joonho wipes the blood of Kija’s temple with trembling fingers.

Naeun’s sobs ring between Taehyung’s ears. His hands fly up to them to muffle the sound of the crying mother clutching onto her dead child.

It’s Taehyung’s fault.

If Taehyung had stayed with Kija, Kija wouldn't be dead.

If he had checked up on Kija earlier, then he'd still be alive.

It he had—

"Taehyung—"

Taehyung doesn't stay to hear the rest of Naeun's sentence. He springs up and runs away.

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"Son, are you certain?"

Taehyung nods.

He hasn't left his bedroom in weeks, and he won't today. He refuses to. He can't possibly show his face to Kija's parents when he's the one at fault. He doesn't deserve to be there, and Naeun and Joonho don't deserve to have this day plagued with their son's murderer.

"Taehyung…"

Taehyung is bundled below his blanket, tremors running through his body under his repressed sobs. He feels a weight behind him as his bed dips.

"This was not your fault."

Taehyung's upper lip twitches. He doesn't want to snap at his mother. She also doesn't deserve that.

"It was an accident. Naeun and Joonho know that. Kija, from where he is now, knows it too."

"Just—" Taehyung inhales and exhales. He counts in his head to trample down his ire. "Just leave me alone. Please." An arm wraps around him, then lips press against his temple.

"I love you, my son."

Taehyung never attends the funeral.

Taehyung blinks through the tears. It's when a small hand holds onto his that he looks down.

"I know it happened because of me, and I know I should've stayed home, but the homework was really boring," Kija mumbles through a pout.

Taehyung's brows furrow, his lips trembling. He embraces Kija, thankful when Kija hugs him back. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Kija's arms tighten around Taehyung's neck. "It's okay Taetae. It didn't hurt, you know." Kija releases his hold to lean back and look up at Taehyung. "I remember, but it didn't hurt. The cliff broke and then I fell and I woke up. And then I could go through trees and scare people."

Taehyung can still vividly recall the ghastly sight of Kija's body, of the blood that had seeped everywhere: on the shorts and shirt, in the hair, and the small, too weak wings. "S'good. Don't want you to remember any pain."

As Taehyung would always do whenever the boy would do well, Kija raises an arm to pat the top of Taehyung's head. "You're okay, Taetae."

Taehyung can't suppress his sob this time. He doesn't even try as he hugs Kija again but he lets go seconds later to cup Kija's cheeks to press their forehead together.

"Taetae," Kija starts and leans back with a frown. "You're supposed to say thank you."

"Thank you," Taehyung says through a wet laugh.

Kija's snickering is interrupted by a long, drawn out yawn. He rubs his fists against his eyes, and his form is not as bright as it had been minutes ago. "M'sleepy."

"It's normal," Jungkook says. His eyes are swollen and red too. "You're ready for bed now, aren't you?"

Taehyung understands what Jungkook means.

He stares at Jungkook for a moment and Jungkook peers back at him, waiting.

Then Taehyung nods, a curt, reluctant motion. He clears his throat and discreetly wipes his eyes regardless of how pointless it is. "Say, Kija, do you want to go to sleep? I'll watch over you so you can nap peacefully."

"Mhm," Kija hums and slumps against Taehyung. "Can I sleep on you?"

"'course."

Taehyung tucks Kija against his chest, arms wrapped around the boy. He shields him from the cold with his cloak, draping it over the two of them.

Jungkook rests a hand at the back of Kija's head. "All cozy and warm now?"

"Yes, thank you," Kija says, the syllables slurred together. "Take care of Taetae please, even when he's mean because—" He pauses to yawn and make himself more comfortable on Taehyung's lap. "Because he makes you pick up pine cones, 'cause you've been bad."

"I will, I promise," Jungkook chuckles. "Don't worry."

Taehyung can feel Kija nodding his head.

"I love you Taetae. I missed you."

Taehyung muffles his muted cries against Kija's crown, his eyes closing as he whispers "I love you too, sleep well."

“S’not your fault, okay? But I forgive you anyway Taetae.”

The weight Taehyung has had to carry for nearly a decade alleviates in his mind, body and soul as a whole.

Kija’s form loses more and more of its light. Amidst the tears, Taehyung can see Jungkook’s fire flickering where a heart would be in Kija’s chest, spreading to the stomach. Jungkook’s eyes are shut, the black flames enveloping his arms. Kija’s soul becomes less solid and visible in Taehyung’s arms, less present and existing. The flames grow, and they don’t burn even as some touch Taehyung’s skin.

Taehyung doesn’t get to say or hear more. He doesn’t have the time to whisper reassuring words to Kija as the ethereal body loses its shape, withdrawing where Jungkook’s flames reside in it. The blue, glowing soul is consumed by the flames, dissipating in a gust of snowy, raven smoke.

The cloak falls from where it had been swathing Kija.

The tattoos covering Jungkook's arms retract, his eyes reverting back to their misty brown. “I think…” Jungkook trails off, his gaze meeting Taehyung’s. “I think this was why he hadn’t passed, Taehyung. He wanted you to know it wasn't your fault”

Taehyung nods, unable to speak.

“I won’t propose to hug you, but I can hold your hand if you want.”

Taehyung wouldn’t be able to stop crying if someone asked him to, or if the shame grew sour. So when he grabs a tentative hold of Jungkook’s wrist, he blames it on the coldness surrounding them, that he's seeking warmth rather than comfort.

The slow, steady pulse of Jungkook's heart that beats beneath the pulp of Taehyung's fingers is calming for reasons Taehyung does not question. He’s too tired for that.

“I wasn’t—” When Taehyung blinks, a tear falls down on their clasped hands. “Wasn’t expecting any of that, and I shouldn’t trust what I saw."

“I’m not lying and this wasn’t a ploy,” Jungkook rasps, an edge to his timber.

“I know.” Taehyung surveys Jungkook. “I know. This was Kija.”

“It was.”

A rustle erupts in the forest.

Taehyung’s head darts toward it.

His tensed muscles relax when he sees a bird fly off in the night sky. “We should go." Taehyung unfastens his fingers from Jungkook's, unsure on whether to feel repulsion at the touch or a sliver of alien comfort. “I’ll fly us back.”

“Okay.”

Taehyung stands. Jungkook mirrors him.

Taehyung's gaze traces the headstone, up to the fully grown dragon that should have been Kija. It's a strange feeling that rises in him, as though he's grieving the boy again. However this time, it's not riddled with guilt. It's lighter. More appeased and relieved.

With the image of Kija's smiling face in mind, Taehyung grabs the pouch of nixes, and flies off with Jungkook.

Taehyung cries for the majority of the night once secured in the privacy of his bedroom. Then he passes out on the floor, only to wake up crying and dozing off once more on his bed this time. He sleeps until late afternoon, restless at first then more serene.

Jungkook had said nothing when they had gotten back. He had not pushed Taehyung to explain the scent of death in the basement either.

However Taehyung knows that he's delaying the inevitable the longer he sits immobile on his mattress and ponders on what to do.

After what has happened last night; after Jungkook has granted him another token of trust and a closure Taehyung had never allowed himself to experience with Kija; Jungkook deserves to have some of his questions answered.

So Taehyung climbs down the stairs in the evening, finding Jungkook loitering in the living room.

Jungkook glances at Taehyung. "Hey."

"Hey," Taehyung croaks out and he walks to the kitchen to serve himself a cup of water.

"I made some crêpes. Junhyun gave me a recipe. The strawberry jam is next to the plate. But if you want a more filling meal, there's some leftovers in the cooler."

"Crêpes' fine."

A silence stretches between the two.

Taehyung grows more and more angsty. He distracts himself by making some coffee and munching on a crêpe while waiting for his beverage to brew.

"I'll only say it once," Jungkook starts, "but if you ever want to talk about Kija or anything else, I'm here. I won't judge, and neither will I speak if you don't want me to."

Taehyung doesn't look at Jungkook, his back to him, but he nods and hopes that Jungkook has seen it. He's uncomfortable enough as he is.

Minutes later, settled on his armchair, Taehyung opts to simply pretend like nothing has occurred and he says "What do you want to know about the basement?"

Jungkook lowers his book, the basilisk on his lap.

“I’m wondering how much I’ve misjudged you, if your family is a murderous one or not.”

“We’re not,” Taehyung sighs and reclines against his seat.

“Well... You can’t blame me for thinking that. I still am, to be honest. You haven’t given me any reason not to.”

“We didn’t kill any of those dragonborns. Why would I, my parents, or Jimin, ever do this? If we'd actually murdered those dragonborns, why would I care so much about whether or not you’re here to decimate us? I'd never hurt a dragonborn unless I deem it warranted. Or accidental,” he adds, his thoughts fleeting back to last night.

“Warranted like with Seungwon?"

“Like that bastard.”

“And like Minho,” Jungkook carries on, an arm bent on his chair, his chin supported by his hand.

“Or Woobin,” Taehyung finishes. “Would you like a list of the dragonborns I’d like to put under?” He adds as a sarcastic jab.

“Actually, yes, if you’re willing to provide it. It’d be nice to know who my betrothed sees as an enemy."

Taehyung huffs.

He breathes a little easier now, the air not as terse and dense as it had been before.

Unlike what Taehyung had anxiously expected, the Prince isn’t mocking him for his effusion of sentiment last night. Jungkook isn’t allowing the air to grow stiff, and neither is he pitying Taehyung or bringing forth Kija, an attention that Taehyung is thankful for.

“Who killed those dragonborns, then?” Jungkook asks.

“I can’t say.”

Jungkook hums and when he tilts his head, the basilisk does too. If Taehyung had not been the prideful man that he is, he would squirm under the scrutiny of the two beings staring at him. At least this time Jungkook’s eyes aren’t as frightening as they had been when he had used his arcane.

“You seemed scared at the pit,” Jungkook starts. “I said that you must have a *really* good motive to marry me: a human and heir to the Jeon dynasty.”

“And?”

“And fear could be a great incentive. You’re scared,” Jungkook states. Taehyung does not try to deny it. “Something happened or is still happening, and it terrified you. Still is. Fear is the only sentiment I can think of that would bring you to push aside your hatred for us.”

Jungkook is dangerous, Taehyung realizes at once, and not due to his basilisk, his arcane or the influence his lineage has over humans.

Taehyung does not speak or move. He remains expressionless, yet something must betray him because Jungkook's lips curl upward, his gaze calculating as he peers at Taehyung through the strands of hair cascading his forehead.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"I'm sure the Queen and King loved hearing about this," Taehyung tests.

"I haven't told them."

"You're gaining compromising information about us, and you didn't share it with your parents? Really?"

"I did not. Why would I?"

Why would he indeed if his rancor for his parents is true?

"Do they know about that arcane of yours?"

"No."

"What would happen if I told them?"

The basilisk hisses, as expected. A liquid — venom — skims down the fangs. Jungkook's aloof stare veers into a glare, his teeth gritting as the muscles of his jaw shift. *As expected too.*

"Let's avoid any unfortunate end for the both of us," Jungkook eventually answers, a certain nervousness coating his voice.

After all, *Jungkook* is the one who has given away his sensitive secret.

"How come you haven't told them about your arcane? How come they don't know, to begin with?"

And how is Jungkook a warlock if his parents are humans? Arcane cannot simply blossom in someone out of nowhere and then be used by them. A person is born with or without arcane, all depending on their ancestry.

"Arcane frightens Seohyung and Sungmin as much as it interests them," Jungkook shrugs. "If they were to know about my necromancy now, they would kill me. Or worse."

"And what other ability does she have?" Taehyung says with a nod toward Revna.

"As I said, it's personal to me. Plus I've responded to many of your queries and shared a lot with you, more than with anyone else aside from Joon and Yoongi."

A silence floats between them.

"You're right," Taehyung eventually says.

"Regarding?"

"What you said about fear." It's insignificant enough to not be a damning admission.

"What frightens you?"

“Can’t tell.”

“Am I in danger?”

Taehyung can’t help but laugh. “Not unless you’re part of the instigators.”

“Thank God,” Jungkook exclaims and relaxes on his seat. “I haven’t instigated anything so I *am* safe. Alas.”

“You’re overly confident again,” Taehyung mumbles, dizzied by Jungkook’s change in demeanor.

Jungkook reverts back to his old self: bratty *and* pouty, which is both infuriating but also relieving somehow. “Am I? I’m not scheming any Machiavellian plot against dragonborns. You know, I've been *greatly* stressed since you and your family started giving me the cold shoulder. You've told them what the ring found,” he adds, accusatory. “Meaning that if I fully want my peace back, I have to tell your parents that I’m a necromancer."

Taehyung drums his fingers on his knee. He ponders over this for a moment. “You don’t have to tell them. I can explain that we talked, and that I deemed what I found safe. Or at least safe to us. For now. I guess.”

Jungkook laughs. “You don’t even sound convinced of yourself.”

“Because I still don’t trust you. I just… distrust you less.” Remembrance of Taehyung holding Jungkook’s hand flickers in his head. “I just jumped the gun on several things.”

“Actually, I have a question about your whole investigation.”

“So do I. You recognized Yoongi’s book, didn’t you?”

“Yup,” Jungkook smiles and pops out the ‘p’. “I was wondering how you ended up with it, and then I questioned how *Hoseok* got in contact with Yoongi. But then I recalled that Yoongi has worked with a lot of dragonborns, so...”

“I should’ve known,” Taehyung grumbles, feeling stupid for having figured this out so late. “I knew something was wrong with your reaction after seeing that book.”

“Is this why you snatched mine away?”

“More or less… I initially theorized that you were the warlock I was dealing with in the book,” Taehyung confesses.

Jungkook blinks a couple times. Then he bursts into a loud, obnoxious laughter, and the basilisk seems to experience the same hilarity because she emits a series of hisses as she bumps her snout against Jungkook’s cheek. “Oh my God!”

"Shut up."

"You're an imbecile!"

“Shut up!”

“No! You—”

“It made sense!” Taehyung roars. “First you acted like you were familiar with the book and then there was this whole weird mess with the timing that was so damn off! Whenever you’d write in your own book, writing would appear in mine! What else was I supposed to think!”

“But why would I do it right in front of you, an irrationally paranoid man?!”

Taehyung glares at the closed curtains. He folds a leg over his knee and slumps down his seat. “S’what I thought after ruining your notebook. Accidentally, ruining it.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Jungkook *giggles*.

“Fuck off.”

“But you’re smart too. Somewhat,” Jungkook adds with a teasing smile. “It’s a nice change from the other suitors I’ve had.”

“I’m definitely better than any of them,” Taehyung can’t help but uselessly provide.

“Debatable," Jungkook hums.

Taehyung pins Jungkook with a stony look.

Taehyung wouldn't say he's happy, but he's experiencing something akin to this. He hadn’t realized how stifling the mutual enmity had been for the past couple weeks until it finally vanished. Jungkook could still be lying, and he is definitely hiding a few more secrets, however Taehyung has a leverage he can use against Jungkook now if need be.

All in all, the ease of the bickering they fall into is nice.

Well.

Perhaps not nice. ‘Better’ is a more fitting term.

“Is what you fear related to the sealed door in your parents’ basement?”

"How—"

“You’re not the only one who knows how to spy on someone.”

Taehyung is impressed, but he’d rather shrivel and die than admit it to the smug Prince. “You fucking *viper*.”

“Partially unrelated, but can we both agree on not spying, stalking or, hmm, playing games with the other anymore? I think we both prefer confrontations anyway, and we clearly thrive at doing so.” Mirth dances in Jungkook's eyes.

“That’s fine by me.”

“Great. That still doesn’t answer my question about the sealed door. Is it there to protect something or someone? Doesn’t seem like it,” Jungkook muses after a lull. “Unless the door is keeping away what is frightening you."

As he had unwillingly done so before, Taehyung must give away an answer because Jungkook gasps, the basilisk peering up at him when he does.

“Oh I’m right!”

“Shut up.”

“I found it so *odd* how you categorically refused to go downstairs in your parents’ basement when you have no trouble entering our own. Meaning that your problem with your parents’ basement is related to what’s *inside* of it, not the place itself."

Taehyung doesn’t mean to gawk and unwillingly stroke Jungkook's ego, but he does anyway. “Are you some kind of fucking genius mastermind?”

“Yes,” Jungkook replies without missing a beat. “That means I won the bet, by the way.”

“No. I did. I found out about your arcane first.”

“You somewhat found out.”

“So did you. Meanwhile I not only know that you’re a necromancer, but I also know about her and her arcane."

“I’m the one who mentioned your secret first, so technically, I won.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“If so, let’s call it a draw.”

“Nope.”

“I’m not going through the bet.”

“Oh so the Prince won’t stick up to his words? Shocking.”

“*I am*. You’re the one who isn’t. We clearly both partially figured out each other’s secret, and since we can’t determine who did first, it's a draw."

“Technically, you haven’t figured out mine fully.”

“Technically, you haven’t figured out mine fully either."

“What else are you hiding, huh? Got another pet of yours I should worry about?”

“Can’t tell,” Jungkook says, in an echo of Taehyung’s earlier responses.

“Damned brat.”

Jungkook snickers. “But I don’t have any other deadly friend like Revna. As for my other secret, as I said, rather than a secret, it’s personal and related to my arcane, but you know almost everything about it already.” His timber is soft but it sounds unhappy. “The last couple weeks were kinda terrible, and it'd be nice if it doesn’t become this uncomfortable again because you’re convinced that I’m scheming something.”

“I questioned your hatred for Seungwon and your parents after finding out about the ancient arcanes.”

Jungkook’s head shifts to arch a brow at Taehyung. “I thought I made it clear that if there is *one* matter you can trust, it’s my contempt for them.”

“That I understood when we followed Seungwon.”

Jungkook’s repulsion and anger had been potent back then, heightened by the shiver that had run through his body, by his scent that had turned more and more sour the longer they had been in Seungwon’s presence, and by the nails that had sunk through his clothes and bitten at Taehyung's skin.

“Are you afraid of Seungwon?”

“Yes," Jungkook answers with honesty.

“Is your fear malleable?”

Jungkook’s shoulders shrug with the huff he exhales. “Not the way you’re implying. I wouldn’t work for him and do what he asks.”

“You have in the past though,” Taehyung cheaply counters.

“I have. And then I bit off his earlobe.”

Right…

“Are we good?”

Taehyung blinks in confusion. “Uh?”

“Are we good?” Jungkook repeats. Similar to his basilisk, Jungkook is curled up on his armchair, thighs pressed against his chest, and he looks demure when his tentative gaze meets Taehyung’s, the bottom of his face buried against his knees.

“I don’t know about good,” Taehyung starts, “but I don’t feel like snapping your neck anymore. Take that as you will.”

“What about my arcane? Will it be a problem?”

“I have plenty of questions, but they can wait after the wedding,” Taehyung says as he stands. The underlying meaning of his words is caught by Jungkook if Jungkook’s smile is any indication.

“Okay, we’re good, then. Meanwhile, I don’t feel like running away anymore because I thought you and your family may have been serial killers.”

“Can’t believe you entertained that idea for a second."

“I don’t anymore.”

Taehyung pauses as he stares outside through the bay windows, the purple and orange hues of the dusk surrounding them. He shudders when he sees a movement in the trees. “Wait.” He swivels

around to watch Jungkook. “Are there any ghosts in the house?”

Jungkook snorts. “No, don’t worry.”

Taehyung internally sighs in relief.

“Also, I call them lost souls or souls. I prefer it to the word ‘ghost’."

"Sure."

"And please, do keep my arcane to yourself,” Jungkook warns through a yawn. “I’m gonna head to bed.”

Taehyung waits until Jungkook is almost out of earshot. “Thank you.”

Jungkook’s head peeks out from behind the railing, his smile kind. “You’re welcome. Thank you for listening last night and being… accepting. Oh,” he exclaims, “and if you found some scattered bags with necessities in it, don’t mind them.”

“What?”

“Let’s just say I was heavily prepared to leave in case you reacted badly.”

“Of course you were…"

“Goodnight, Taehyung.”

Taehyung does not answer as he walks outside.

His trip to his parents’ home is short. He opens the door, greeted by his father who's settled at the coffee table, his mother on a trip to Amaris.

“Taehyung, how was your—” Junhyun pauses. His eyes draw a quick once over of Taehyung’s face. A concerned frown knits his face. “My son, has something happened?”

Before Taehyung can backtrack, he says “Can we go see Naeun and Joonho together?”

If Junhyun is taken aback by the request, he shows no sign of it. Instead, he rises to his feet, and when he reaches Taehyung, he tugs him into a hug. Taehyung’s hands grip at the back of his father’s shirt. “I’m proud of you, my son. They will be happy to see you.”

Taehyung doubts it but he remains quiet.

He's still silent as he and his father fly to Naeun and Joonho’s familiar house.

The lights are on inside.

Taehyung and Junhyun come down, landing at the doorstep. Junhyun is the one to knock on the door. Taehyung's hands are too clammy and cowardly.

His heart hammers within his chest, the pulsations erratic and uneven.

The door swings open on Naeun. Her smile drops when her eyes land on Taehyung.

He should have known better. This had been a terrible idea, emboldened by Kija's courage and his words of forgiveness that haven't left Taehyung's mind.

Taehyung is about to fly off when Naeun rushes toward him and yanks him into a tight, bruising embrace.

"By the Elders… Taehyung, finally," Naeun sighs in the dip of his neck. Taehyung doesn't dare hugging her back, his arms dangling limply by his sides. "I've missed you so, so dearly. You cannot imagine—" Naeun halts. She leans back to cradle Taehyung's face, her thumb wiping at tears Taehyung hadn't noticed. "It felt as though we had lost two sons that day."

Taehyung clasps onto Naeun's wrists. "I'm sorry," he says, barely above a whisper.

"I know. Elders and I know, Taehyung. We forgive you, even if there is nothing to be forgiven." Naeun smiles before twisting her head around. "Joonho! Taehyung is here!"

A clatter erupts at the back. Seconds later, Joonho appears in the living room, his face aghast and eyes widened.

"Oh you—" Joonho marches toward Taehyung and smacks his crown. He unceremoniously shoves Naeun away to bring Taehyung into a hug. "You damn fool," Joonho says and ignores the slap his scowling mate lands on the back of his head. "Do you have any idea of how boring life has been without someone to carve wood with?"

Taehyung emits a sound that is half a laugh and half a sob. He doesn't hesitate when he reciprocates the embrace, burying his face on Joonho's shoulder. "It's been a while."

"I noticed Seungwon has yet to receive his invitation. He was quite saddened by the news, and I took it upon myself to summon him for the wedding."

See, Jungkook always expects the meetings with Amaris' rulers — and more specifically the Queen — to go horrendously wrong. Today has proven itself to be worse than anything he could have anticipated.

Taehyung's scoff catches Jungkook's attention as the dragonborn glances at the scar marring Jungkook's cheek. "Jungkook and I agreed on rescinding Seungwon's invitation."

He, Jungkook and Dahee are seated in a loveseat facing the one the Queen is installed on.

"You can retract the invitation again," Taehyung continues with an authoritative tone.

"I'm afraid it is too late," the Queen says with a tight lipped smile.

"You're mistaking my words." Taehyung's voice dips into those raspy waters it tends to fall into whenever his temper is ignited. "I'm not asking. Seungwon is not joining the wedding, nor any part of the ceremony."

"Neither am I asking," the Queen counters.

“It’s fairly simple,” Taehyung begins, "you either take Seungwon’s invitation back, or the ceremony will be done behind closed doors. If we're efficient enough, the wedding can happen as soon as…” He peers outside the window. “A few hours. The time needed for Jungkook and I to get back to our house and have it be officiated there.”

“The wedding is a public event. It will—”

“Not happen if Seungwon is there."

Jungkook bites down on the inside of his cheek to suppress his and Revna’s hilarity at the peeved expression that pinches the Queen’s face.

“What feud do you have with this dragonborn?”

“Many."

Jungkook wonders what it may be as well. Taehyung’s hatred for Seungwon is too acute for it to be impersonal.

“I’m sure Jungkook has no trouble with Seungwon being there," Seohyung says with a pointed look.

Jungkook can sense Taehyung’s gaze on him along with everyone else’s. His clasped hands tighten together. Revna’s ire grows. Opposing the Queen is foolish. It only results in discipline, shut rooms and isolation.

However...

However, Jungkook isn't so alone anymore, he thinks, his knee pressed against Taehyung’s.

In the past, Namjoon and Yoongi had been there to take Jungkook’s side if an argument would arise, but even then their help had been limited, dismissed for the most part. On the other hand with the Kim family, the Queen does not have any leverage to force obedience from them.

With renewed courage fed from the freedom he's had the privilege to bask into since moving to Vanae, Jungkook speaks.

“As a matter of fact, I do. I do not wish to see this man at my wedding.”

“That settles it,” Taehyung concludes, not moving from the points of contact on their thighs.

“I cannot simply cancel the invitation. It does not work this way,” the Queen says.

“Perhaps it was a problem to consider before sending it without our consent,” Taehyung retorts.

“ *Jungkook.* ”

Jungkook does not avert his eyes from the Queen.

“You must be aware of the fact that Seungwon’s presence will be a great display of forgiveness, and that no childish resentment festers between our families after the difficulties you have caused."

An incredulous laugh escapes Jungkook. “The difficulties *I* caused?”

“Yes, as you tend to."

“Seungwon is not coming to the ceremony." Jungkook has half a mind to allow Revna to come out of the ruby and sink her fangs into the Queen's hand as she desires to. "This is not a debate, nor is it negotiable.”

“Do not forget your place, Son," the Queen snips. "Namjoon and Yoongi haven’t.”

Jungkook isn’t sure what prompts Taehyung to draw the gesture he does next.

Perhaps Taehyung wants to reassure Jungkook — although Jungkook doubts it. Or maybe it’s due to what Jungkook had requested some time ago about ‘acting satisfied’. Nonetheless, a hand rests on Jungkook’s leg, respectful of his boundaries as it does not venture higher than the knee.

A saccharine smile that is anything but kind floats on Taehyung's lips. “I can assure you that he very well knows his place, which is by my side, as my betrothed, future King of Amaris, and co-leader of Vanae.”

Jungkook can only imagine the bitterness the acknowledgement must have left on Taehyung’s tongue, but Jungkook still smiles, all that he can do to conceal his surprise.

His pinky knocks against Taehyung’s, inquisitive. They haven’t talked about hand holding and other small gestures like these, after all.

Taehyung’s fingers on Jungkook’s knee squeeze, and Jungkook takes that as a permission to cover the back of Taehyung’s hand, tucking the tip of his fingers under the palm.

Taehyung’s hand is warm. The fingers are long, some with calluses on them and the heel of the palm. Jungkook can even see some faint scars on the knuckles, most likely earned through hunting or the wood carving hobby that to this day still takes Jungkook aback.

He has caught Taehyung carving miniature sculptures a few times in their garden, and watching the energetic, gruff dragonborn sit still for hours on end while painstakingly chiseling a piece of wood into an admittedly adorable creature has been an endearing sight.

“So, Queen Seohyung,” Dahee starts. “What do you say? I fear our sons are quite adamant about their decision, and a wedding without its main participants would be worthless, would it not?”

The Queen's stony eyes dart on Jungkook and Taehyung's tangled hands. Her nose twitches. “Seungwon has to attend the wedding.”

“Why is that?” Dahee asks.

“Because we have to make up for the embarrassment Jungkook has brought upon my family.”

Jungkook’s fingers constrict. He relents his clamp when he realizes that his nails had been sinking into Taehyung’s palm. He peers at Taehyung, to convey a mute apology, however Taehyung appears unfazed, his eyes devoid of any irritation.

“Do you really want to prioritize your hurt feelings over your reputation?” Taehyung questions next. “Because I can assure you that if Seungwon is present at the ceremony, I’ll whisper into any willing ears tales of how the Queen has invited the very man that has raised his hands on her son.

You mention Jungkook bringing shame upon your family, and I wonder who really will if your people learn that you've turned a blind eye on what Seungwon has done to Jungkook."

Jungkook thanks the Gods that he does not live at the citadel anymore, otherwise he would be the recipient of the Queen's growing wrath. He strokes an index over Taehyung's knuckles to ease the grip of the fingers, and it works, strangely enough. Taehyung's clutch not only relaxes, but also translates into the brush of a thumb across Jungkook's thigh.

"For someone who holds a particularly vehement hatred for humans, you certainly show a surprising care for Jungkook," the Queen remarks.

"We've been getting to know each other, talking about our favorite color," Taehyung shrugs. "Nevertheless, I wouldn't be pleased to see at my wedding the man that had once hurt my betrothed."

The Queen's chest rises around a huffed chuckle. "And what could happen, exactly, if Seungwon is there? You cannot possibly start a civil war."

"No, but a challenge can."

Dahee emits an *'Oh'* on Jungkook's right, and whatever has been said seems to have thrown both mothers both for a loop.

"A challenge?" Jungkook echoes, half lost and half curious.

Taehyung glances at Jungkook. "It's an old… tradition."

"What happens during this 'old tradition'?"

"A fight."

"Dragonborns' challenges have grown obsolete," the Queen counters.

Taehyung smiles. He retracts his hand from Jungkook's knee. Jungkook misses the warmth and anchor the touch had provided, but it's made a little better when Taehyung arm drapes atop the loveseat's backrest, pressed against Jungkook's shoulder blades.

A hand cups Jungkook's chin, the fingers sliding to grab a better hold of his jaw. Jungkook does not brace against the touch, feeling no revulsion unlike he would if it had been Seungwon. Instead, he allows Taehyung to turn his head, the dragonborn's eyes cast down on the beige and sunken line engraved on Jungkook's cheek.

"Seungwon gave you this, hasn't he?" Taehyung asks.

"I—" Jungkook and Taehyung's faces are close enough for him to feel Taehyung's breath on his warming cheek when the latter speaks. "He... He did, yes."

Still cradling Jungkook's jaw in a way that is unusually gentle, Taehyung tilts his head to stare at the Queen. "This scar is enough to warrant a challenge if I desire to. It begs the question of how important your partnership with Seungwon is. If I am to challenge him, he'll die."

Jungkook shivers at the low timber, a content warmth flickering in his chest.

“He won’t win against me, and he’s too prideful to surrender. So it’s up to you, really,” Taehyung finishes and releases Jungkook.

Taehyung reclines, creating some sliver of distance between them, but Jungkook shuffles closer to tuck himself against Taehyung’s side. The crawl on Jungkook's skin ebbs away at the myriad of points of contact he and Taehyung's bodies share.

“You leave me no choice,” Seohyung sneers, her eyes narrowed around a downturn curl of her lips. “I had not anticipated such a cunning, meager ultimatum from you.”

Taehyung smiles back. “I’m delightfully unpredictable."

That Jungkook can agree with.

The Queen's eyes shift between Jungkook and Taehyung. This time, Jungkook is the one to lay a palm on Taehyung’s thigh, partially to seek comfort, but also to hide the tremors coursing through his fingers. Jungkook can’t stop worrying about the Queen calling off the wedding with the Kim family to, in lieu, wed him with Seungwon.

Jungkook would rather avoid becoming a fugitive Prince, if possible.

“Fine,” the Queen sighs. “I will retract the invitation.”

Jungkook exhales a small breath. His muscles relax and Revna does too in her ruby, the sharpness of her anger alleviating.

“Excellent!” Dahee cheers with a clap. “Now that it is out of the way, we should discuss other invited guests and ensure that none of them can accidentally trigger a conflict.”

“Of course." The Queen rises to her feet. “Allow me to fetch our wedding planner. I will be quick.”

She strides toward the double doors that the two guards open for her, framing her as the three of them vacate the place.

“Fuck."

Jungkook internally echoes Taehyung's expletives.

"Hellish pig."

“I’m proud of you, Jungkook, you were really brave,” Dahee praises and pats his leg.

Jungkook peers back at her, the warmth in his chest spreading.

“Her face was fucking hilarious,” Taehyung snickers. “Can’t believe she thought she could invite the other pig.”

“Try to be less abrasive with her, Son. Let’s not mindlessly provoke her."

“I think this,” Taehyung points at Jungkook’s cheek, “is reason enough. Among other things, like the fact that I can’t stand her or Seungwon.”

“Keep in mind that you shouldn’t challenge him either way. It is too risky, and we have too much at stake already.”

“I know. I was bluffing,” Taehyung grumbles and Jungkook refrains from laughing at the way the dragonborn deflates, evidently disappointed.

“Hopefully the Queen hasn’t noticed this.”

“She didn’t,” Jungkook affirms. “You were convincing.” His and Taehyung’s gaze lock, the latter unreadable. It’s when Taehyung’s knee jumps up and down that Jungkook is reminded that his hand is still curved over Taehyung’s knee. He promptly removes it. “What if he joins the ceremony anyway?”

“Would the Queen go against her own words?”

“She usually doesn’t, but she tends to find loopholes.”

“We’re fine then,” Taehyung dismisses. “And if Seungwon does make his appearance at the wedding, I’ll chase him away as I said.”

“You’ll challenge him?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “But I can provoke him until he strikes first and *then* I’ll get the chance to either strike back or challenge him. Whichever comes first." A dreamy look smoothing out the wrinkles of his glower. “By the Elders... The wedding would be a glorious day if I were to bash his face into a bloody pulp.”

“You’re really confident,” Jungkook distractedly notes. Taehyung hasn’t pulled away yet: their sides are still pressed flushed, Jungkook’s shoulder nestled under Taehyung’s arm.

“Because I have every right to be. I’m the most powerful dragonborn the world has ever gotten the chance to know.”

“That is simply not true at all,” Dahee counters at the playful answer.

Taehyung purses his lips. “Mom…”

Dahee snickers, echoed by Jungkook who imagines a young Taehyung boasting about his many breaths.

“Seungwon is powerful too,” Jungkook pipes up. “And a trickster. He can win by using dishonest methods.”

“He could certainly try.”

Jungkook huffs. If a challenge is to unfold, he worries about what Taehyung’s potential defeat may engender.

“Seungwon won’t kill you, if this is what your horrible frown is about."

“Death doesn’t frighten me,” Jungkook says with a knowing smile that Taehyung reacts to with a roll of his eyes, “and Seungwon could do worse than killing. I know my feelings don’t matter much to you, but I’m still concerned about him snatching me away.”

“If he does, I’ll snatch you back.”

Jungkook does not think it’s possible for a heart to achieve this in the first place, but it stutters anyway.

He doesn’t know what he’s searching for in Taehyung’s gaze, if he’ll ever decipher the puzzle Taehyung makes, however he can’t unearth any manipulative care in it. While Taehyung can be hard to read sometimes, he also holds a simplicity in him honed by a blunt honesty.

It’s refreshing and so *pleasing.*

“You may be powerful, but even you wouldn’t be able to find me if Seungwon hides me somewhere,” Jungkook settles on saying, lest he does something as psychotic as holding Taehyung’s hand once more.

“I remember you mentioning a tracking spell. Maybe you should ask that warlock friend of yours to make you one."

“Perhaps I should,” Jungkook muses. “If it’s a two way kind of spell, you could have the other half?”

“Why me,” Taehyung grunts and withdraws his arm from the top of the backrest to cross them over his chest.

“Because you’re strong,” Jungkook teases with a quirk of his brow. Plus he can’t think of anyone else he’d give the other half of the spell to aside from Namjoon and Yoongi.

“Doesn’t mean I want to use my strength for you.”

“You’re an annoying prick.”

“Takes one to recognize another.”

Jungkook pinches Taehyung’s thigh at the childish retort. The motion is retaliated by a zap on the back of his neck.

“You two. Behave,” Dahee chastises. “The harpy is returning.”

Jungkook emits a loud laugh that he muffles in his hand. Dahee winks at him.

The Queen enters the meeting room, accompanied by a man and a pile of papers that the wedding planner deposits on the coffee table.

“Let us begin,” the Queen says.

They talk.

And talk some more.

It’s dull, really. The conversation is a mind-numbing circle of all that Jungkook already knows about the wedding’s organization. Jungkook is bored.

On the other hand, a tightness rises in Taehyung's jaw and clenched teeth. He hasn't spoken a word since the Queen has come back, aside from the instance where he discreetly shuffles away from Jungkook.

Jungkook retraces what has been said, but he can't figure out what could have ignited Taehyung's discomfort.

It takes over two hours before Taehyung and Jungkook can leave, Dahee staying behind to finalize a matter or two with the Queen.

Jungkook shudders when the outside chill hits him. Taehyung immediately shifts to his dragon counterpart and presents his talon. Jungkook climbs on it without contest, and the two of them fly back to the house.

Taehyung has been cold for the remainder of the day, night, and next few days.

Jungkook is lost.

He can't pinpoint what has gone wrong during the meeting with the Queen.

Revna, who's sliding across the floor and chasing after a ball of paper, has been darting glances at Taehyung, her worry coalescing with Jungkook's confusion. She had questioned Jungkook with a hiss and twist of her head that Jungkook had answered with a shrug.

It had started with Taehyung cursing at the malfunctioning heater, then at a stuck lid of a strawberry jam he had ended up shattering into pieces after exerting a tad too much force to pry it open. He had gone out at some point to retrieve some logs that he had tossed near the fireplace in a loud rattle. What disconcerts Jungkook is the skittishness in Taehyung's movements, the way they're curt and surly, punctuated by a familiar scowl.

Jungkook doesn't ask. It's pointless and will only serve to make matters worse.

Later, when the sun has left its place for the moon, Jungkook twists and turns under his blanket. Revna is sleeping on Jungkook's second pillow, blanketed by the heavy comforter.

He can't stop thinking of the step forward he and Taehyung had taken, only for it to be rendered null by the ten steps back they've taken at Amaris. Jungkook sighs. He doesn't want to make any effort to talk about this with Taehyung.

After checking up on Revna and pecking her crown, Jungkook climbs off his bed, slides on his slippers and makes his way down the stairs.

He fixes himself a glass of water. It's when he passes by the glass solarium that he notices a presence in it.

Taehyung is pacing back and forth, hands shoved in his pants' pockets as he rolls his shoulders. He walks from bay window to bay window, and the sight would be funny with the fluffy beige slippers clad on his feet if it hadn't been for the upset marring his face. Jungkook thinks that Taehyung has

sensed his presence when he halts, however Taehyung resumes his walk to slump down on one of the lounging chairs placed at the center of the room.

Jungkook turns around and leaves his glass on the kitchen counter. He trudges to the solarium that he slides the glass doors of.

The night sky is breathtaking outside, the stars countless and glimmering through the navy darkness, not a single cloud fogging their beauty. The interior of the solarium smells like a storm. It reminds Jungkook of the scent of rain that had poured in the living room when Seungwon had flown above the house one evening.

Taehyung has an arm dangling from the chair's arm, the other bent to support his tilted head.

Jungkook enters the room, leaning against a bay window. Taehyung doesn't budge.

"Taehyung?"

A curse responds to Jungkook, although Taehyung still seems unaware of someone else's presence.

Taehyung hunches forward and rubs his palms on his face, muttering intelligible words to himself. He sighs, his muscles tense, and Jungkook sees why when the quivers in Taehyung's hands travel down his arms and course through his body in waves of shudder.

Jungkook crosses the distance. He crouches near the lounging chair. "Taehyung? What's going on?" He extends a hand, however when his fingers graze Taehyung's arm, Taehyung flinches away with a swear.

"Don't fuc— Don't touch me."

Jungkook doesn't take it to heart, just like he hasn't taken most of Taehyung's rejections. "What's wrong?"

"S'none of your damn business. Fuck." Taehyung clenches and relaxes his hands only to pass them through his strands seconds later. "I'm not— I'm not doing this."

"Doing what?"

"The ceremony."

"You want to call off the wedding?" Jungkook would be fine with it, but he'd like to have it confirmed now in order to prepare for his departure.

"No. I— Why didn't I think of this? I'm so damn stupid." Taehyung covers his mouth with his palm, a storm raging in his eyes. "Shit."

"What—"

"Your parents will invite humans."

"To the ceremony, yes. You—"

"Do you know who?"

All at once, understanding dawns on Jungkook.

Jungkook had fathomed early on that Taehyung's vicious hatred for humans is not one derived from the remnants of rivalry the Great War had elicited. It's too personal to be induced by such an archaic vendetta.

"Are you worried about stumbling on humans you don't like?"

Taehyung, to Jungkook's surprise, nods after a brief moment, the motion curt and punctuated by a twist of his mouth and averting gaze. The trembling in Taehyung is more muted now, his body locked into stillness.

Witnessing Taehyung's withdrawal into this shell of shame and apprehension, so far from his usual brazenness, yanks at a part of Jungkook's heart.

Jungkook kneels next to the chair while facing Taehyung, tucking his hands under his thighs. "If you tell me the names of the humans who— Of the humans you don't like, we can make sure they aren't invited." Taehyung glances at Jungkook and shakes his head. "You can't give their names?"

Is it unsafe?

"I can't give what I don't have."

"I see... You'd recognize them if you were to see their faces?"

A silence falls between them for a while. Jungkook waits, not rushing Taehyung nor making any comments about the shine in the dragonborn's eyes.

"I don't know. It's— I don't know."

"Were they from important or influential families?"

"I don't know."

"This makes it nearly impossible to figure out if some of them are—"

"And what the fuck do you want me to do about it? I'm trying to remember but I can't and—"

"I said it's *nearly* impossible, not entirely. I can ask one of Seohyung's assistants if they have a list of guests for the ceremony and feast. Or Dahee can."

"Not my mother. Don't want her to know."

"To know what?"

"I don't need my mom to know her son is still weak."

"Taehyung, you're not—"

"Don't patronize me."

"And don't interrupt me." Jungkook pins Taehyung with a stern look. "Some things take time to heal, that doesn't make you weak."

“You don’t know anything.” Taehyung rubs the heel of his palms on his eyes. “Forget about it. I can handle it. I’m just tired.”

Taehyung makes a move to stand but Jungkook raises a hand. Jungkook catches himself in time before he can touch Taehyung. “I’ll ask for the list of guests. They’ll have painted portraits adjoining them. If you recognize anyone that you don’t want to see at the wedding, we’ll remove them.”

Taehyung's head lowers. “You don’t understand."

“Then help me understand."

Taehyung shakes his head again and when he raises it to face away from Jungkook, the tears are more evident in them. Jungkook’s own eyes prickle at the sight.

“How about a deal?” Jungkook offers. “I make sure to shun away anyone you don't like at the wedding, while you do the same with Seungwon if he's there.”

“You wouldn’t do it."

“You’ll see.” Jungkook grows quiet and so does Taehyung. Jungkook presses his thighs together in an effort to gather as much warmth as possible, the glacial breeze outside seeping through the solarium’s doors. “Are you cold?” Jungkook asks and Taehyung shrugs. “I’ll be right back.”

Jungkook walks to the living room where he plucks a pair of the blankets. He drapes one over himself and he folds another that he brings to the solarium. He hands it to Taehyung, however instead of taking it, Taehyung breaks the quietude.

“Why are you nice?”

“Uh?”

“Why are you nice to me,” Taehyung reiterates with an accusation that he, himself, winces at.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Taehyung emits a mirthless chuckle. “Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps because I’m an absolute asshole to a person who has objectively not done anything wrong to me, and I don't feel an ounce of guilt about it."

“I don’t know about the lack of guilt, but are my ears deceiving me, or have you finally admitted to being a prick?”

Taehyung sighs Jungkook’s name and it sounds tired on his tongue, lacking its usual bite. “Why are you nice?”

“Why not?” Taehyung's gaze darts across Jungkook’s face. “Acting like an ass toward me isn’t warranted at all, but it’s not hard for me to see that humans have wronged you or family in some ways. I remember how you reacted at the citadel and… It may sound childish, but I know you’re not as bad a person you make yourself out to be."

“So your grand selflessness is why you’re putting up with me."

“I’m not putting up with anything. I simply don’t care. Plus we can both agree that I give back as much snark as you do,” Jungkook quips and smiles at Taehyung's huff. “I also don’t dislike you. You’re pretty fun to be around.”

Taehyung’s head lolls to the side as he arches a brow.

“You're honest. For the most part,” Jungkook adds with a pointed look at his necklace. “You don’t understand how so *lovely* it is to be near someone who’s being himself and wants me to be myself as well. I’m nice for a selfless reason, but I also am for a selfish one born from the craving to be whatever I want, something that I can achieve around you.”

Taehyung’s quietness lingers, but he listens, his eyes not straying away from Jungkook.

“You don’t trust me, and I get that, but I hope you can accept that I’m not here with any ulterior motive. I want… It’s naive, but I just want to live, Taehyung. I want to be happy, I want to be a good king and co-leader to Amaris and Vanae. That’s all.” Jungkook stands. He pulls the edges of the blanket to envelop himself in it, feeling exposed after all he’s shared. “And I meant it about the deal. If a human you dislike is at the ceremony, you can tell me. I’ll have them escorted outside without questions."

Jungkook loiters for a bit, wondering if he’ll receive an answer, but when it becomes clear that he won’t, he swivels around to exit the solarium.

Back in his bedroom and sheltered from the cold, Jungkook cuddles against Revna, his thoughts occupied with Taehyung.

“Taehyung?”

Jungkook searches through the living room then the kitchen. He also checks the solarium but when he still can’t find the dragonborn, he steps outside. It doesn’t take him long to stumble on Taehyung, the latter rummaging inside the double smokehouses. “Taehyung, do you have a minute?”

Taehyung’s head peeks out from the door left ajar. It disappears inside the smokehouse then reappears a moment later. He closes the fox door behind him.

After removing their shoes at the entrance, Jungkook leads them to the kitchen counter where a hefty compendium is deposited. “This is the list of every single human guest that will be invited to the wedding and participate in the feast and ball. I didn’t ask for those that will be present outside of the feast since they won’t be near us in any way.”

It took a small amount of convincing since, instead of directly asking the Queen, Jungkook had opted to steal the compendium thanks to Revna and Namjoon’s help.

“There will be around 300 guests, as you know.” Jungkook opens the front cover of the book. “Around 270 of them are humans, a few are warlocks. It’s a lot to go through, but it might be helpful.”

Taehyung sits on a stool and slides the book toward him. “Not to spit on your efforts.”

“But you’ll do exactly that."

“Unwillingly, yes.” Taehyung sifts through the compendium’s first few pages. “I don’t remember any faces.” His confession is laced with frustration. “I tried to recall the whole night and it’s… It’s not coming back to me. Not even a name. Nothing.”

“You might if you see them in the book, it could trigger some memories. Although I understand if you don’t want that to happen."

“The memories were triggered since we first had that dinner at Amaris.”

Jungkook removes his gloves, scarf and winter coat that he places on the coat hanger. Some coffee had been brewed earlier this afternoon and he heats it up, serving himself and Taehyung a cup.

Jungkook doesn’t want to leave yet, and so he decides to bake some pancakes as an excuse to stay in the kitchen. He swiftly prepares the batter, used to sneak around at the citadel to make pancakes himself.

Taehyung is a third through the compendium when he makes a small noise, the first batch of pancake cooking in the pan.

Jungkook looks behind his shoulder. “Any familiar faces?”

“I’m not sure..."

“Which one?” Jungkook rounds the kitchen island. He rises on his toes and he leans over the counter to peer at the man Taehyung is pointing at. “We’re not inviting him?”

“No, it’s fine. I probably just caught a glimpse of him somewhere or something like that.”

“We can still retract the invitation for safety. I don’t like him, to be honest. He’s a pretentious numskull and don’t you dare say that it takes one to recognize another,” Jungkook adds in the same breath while brandishing his spatula. Taehyung innocently raises his hands. “Because if anything *you're* the pretentious prick too.”

“So what, you can read minds now on top of speaking with the dead?”

“No. As always, you’re just *that* predictable.”

“Fuck off.”

Jungkook saunters back to his pancakes with a chuckle.

Fifteen minutes later, he leaves the pile of goods on a plate, retrieving the new jar of strawberry jam. He spreads the jam on a pancake for Taehyung, doing the same on another with maple syrup. Jungkook hands the snack to Taehyung who distractedly grabs it.

“Where’s the strawberry—” Taehyung pauses when he glances up and sees the jam threatening to spill out of the rolled pancake.

“Already put some on it,” Jungkook needlessly provides.

Taehyung’s eyes narrow. “How did you know?”

“ *Taehyung* .”

“I told you to *not* patronize me.”

“I will because we’ve been living together for a month. I’ve learned a thing or two about you, one of them being that you’re a strawberry fanatic.”

Taehyung clicks his tongue but takes the midnight snack and bites on it while glaring at Jungkook. Jungkook pulls a stool to sit down opposite of Taehyung.

“There’s no one who looks familiar,” Taehyung mutters and swings the book shut a while later. “Was damn useless.”

“It’s fine. We’ll ban any of them if they strike a memory at the wedding, okay? We can keep the compendium and figure out from it if some of those listed are part of the humans you don’t like. You may not remember any faces now, but you might one day.”

Taehyung props an elbow on the counter and rests his chin in his palm. He shamelessly stares ahead, his unreadable — and unnerving — attention riveted on Jungkook.

Jungkook isn’t the kind of man to be easily intimidated, yet he fidgets on his seat at Taehyung’s unwavering gaze. “What?”

“I’m gonna head to bed,” Taehyung declares yet still does not move. “You should as well.”

“I won’t be able to sleep for some time after eating those.” Jungkook gestures at his empty plate. He internally heaves a sigh when Taehyung finally looks away.

“Say the word and I’ll knock you out. Free of charge," Taehyung proposes as he stands. "You won’t even have to plead with me.”

Jungkook draws a faux moue. “You’re such a prick.”

Amusement paints Taehyung’s lips that are curved around the smallest smile Jungkook has ever seen, but it’s *there*, and Jungkook buries his grin in his palm.

When Jungkook comes downstairs to fill up his glass later that night, Taehyung is installed in one of the solarium’s lounging chairs, the bay windows wide open again. This time, Taehyung is wrapped in the blanket Jungkook had given him yesterday, the dragonborn fast asleep and curled up into a ball, hair tousled and sticking up in different directions.

Jungkook can't repress his fond chuckle that he muffles against his palm.

Taehyung reminds Jungkook of the carmine nix that shrivels at the slightest warm touch and expands at a cold one. One day, perhaps, Taehyung will allow Jungkook to thaw at the fortress of ice he has built around himself.

Chapter End Notes

I teared up several times writing this one 👍

Next chapter: THE WEDDIIIIING AFTER 84 YEARS. I'm very excited to write/post chapter 9, I'll add a bunch of visuals throughout it to help you visualize the ceremony and Taekook's garments hehe 🤍 I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I hope you'll like the next one 🫶 🤍

❧ Twitter

Chapter 9: The Wedding — Part I

Chapter Summary

The wedding begins and so does the ceremony, full of ribbons, dancing and traditions.

Chapter Notes

Alas, the wedding begins XD It happens in two parts, this first will be more angled toward the traditions, ceremony and spectacle, while the second part will focus on the feast and after-party. Buckle for both hehe

❧ Twitter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today is the wedding.

It begins in exactly two hours, and this whole betrothal affair has proven itself to be a lot more nerve-inducing than Taehyung had anticipated it to be.

He and his family are at Amaris, in a land that has been privatized for the occasion, and while the open space of the garden and large rooms would usually abate Taehyung's sense of feeling trapped, it does nothing to his growing trepidation. He had been fine up till now, however after entering the castle where the feast and after-party will elapse, the constant reminder of the amount of humans he will be surrounded with for the rest of the evening and night had ignited his restlessness.

"My organs are about to spill out of my ass."

"Charming."

Taehyung's head darts toward Jungkook who's loitering on a chair, the Prince looking at ease, eons away from how Taehyung feels.

The maids are bustling around the place, coming in and out of the castle to prepare the guests' arrival and latter event. The festivities had already begun early in the morning for Amaris and Vanae's inhabitants, the people celebrating and enjoying the plethora of stands and food crowding the streets.

Taehyung still hasn't gotten the time or energy to digest the revelation of Jungkook's arcanic ancestry. He had first been occupied hunting with his squadrons, then the next day had been spent finessing the last touches of the ceremony and his garments, and today is—

It's the damn *wedding* .

Because Taehyung is getting married.

To a — partially — human heir.

“By the Elders,” Taehyung breathes out. “I’m getting married.”

“Well observed, detective,” Jimin jests as he enters the room.

“No. You don’t understand, Jimin. I’ll be married in a few hours. I’ll be tied up to him.” Taehyung points at Jungkook who arches a brow.

“And what a great honor it will be to have me as your husband. I’m quite jealous of you,” Jungkook sighs. “My own betrothed is a bit of a prick, a lot of an idiot, and always in denial about, well, everything. Including his own wedding!”

Jimin bursts into laughter.

Taehyung glowers at Jungkook. “Shut up.”

“I’m here to bring you both upstairs for a quick last minute gathering. The others are waiting,” Jimin announces.

“Great.” Taehyung springs up and strides toward the opened entrance doors. Jimin and Jungkook trail behind him. “I need space.”

A few minutes later, the three of them enter a more secluded room that Dahee, Junhyun and Namjoon are already occupying, the three of them happily conversing.

Taehyung hasn’t spoken to the page much — if at all, really, aside from a one-sided curt greeting.

Jungkook and Jimin join the group.

The tightness in Taehyung's chest alleviates now that he’s near his family and away from the brouhaha still rumbling downstairs. Before he gets to take a single step, the door opens. He turns around.

A man stands at the doorway, smaller than Taehyung by a head or so, his black hair of a medium length waving down his forehead and neck. His eyes are sharp and cat-like as they snap on Taehyung’s. The stranger's face immediately knits, and Taehyung — albeit confused — immediately mirrors the scorn with his own.

A figure rushes past Taehyung who embraces the man.

“Feels like it’s been years,” Jungkook says.

The man smiles, his arms enveloping Jungkook. “Hey.”

Jungkook breaks the hug, his grin taking over his face. “I have to present you to everyone,” he starts and does exactly that, soon reaching Taehyung. “Last but not least, this is Taehyung, my—”

“Betrothed who doesn’t know what privacy is,” the stranger interjects.

Ah.

So that's who it is.

“This is how it’s gonna be?” Taehyung chuckles through a snarky smile. He extends an arm, because he’s polite like that. Yoongi imitates him, the two of them shaking hands with perhaps a tad more force than necessary from both parties.

“I’m Min Yoongi," the man presents himself. “Jungkook’s friend and occasional guard when needed.”

“Kim Taehyung, Vanae’s future leader and occasional hunter of all things.”

“A hunter, you say."

“Yeah.” Taehyung isn’t letting go of Yoongi’s hand and neither is the warlock. The hand shaking continues, soon growing into a bruising grip. “Of bears, griffins and other creatures. Including humans.”

“Not warlocks?” Yoongi says with an air of surprise. “Are we perhaps too difficult for you to chase?”

“Considering how disloyal and cowardly most warlocks are, it makes it quite tedious to track d—”

A hand breaks Taehyung and Yoongi apart. “Are you two done,” Jungkook snips with a glare that bounces off Taehyung.

Jungkook is aiming a pointed, chastising look at Yoongi.

Not Taehyung.

It prompts a satisfied, snobbish curl on Taehyung’s lips.

Jungkook raises an index that he digs on Taehyung’s chest then on Yoongi’s as he speaks. “You two better behave *nicely* at *my* wedding that I want to spend in a cordial and *happy* mood.”

Taehyung and Yoongi huff at the same time. Taehyung clicks his tongue.

“Oh this will be a promising night,” Dahee laughs somewhere at the back of the room, installed on one of Junhyun’s legs as she often is.

Taehyung is shoved to the side by Jimin. He glances at his friend. His eyes narrow the longer he surveys him. Jimin has this *look* in his eyes, one that Taehyung has met many times in the past and that never bodes to anything good.

“Hi!” Jimin grins and shakes hands with Yoongi who seems to tense even more. “I’m Jimin, Taehyung’s big brother. He’s the evil one and I’m the angel one. It’s a pleasure to—”

“For the last fucking time, stop—”

“You’re Jungkook’s warlock friend, right?” Jimin carries on and interrupts Taehyung.

Yoongi nods and releases Jimin’s hand. Jimin hums, his smile everlasting as he tilts his head to the side and leans closer to Yoongi.

Taehyung rolls his eyes.

Jimin isn't even subtle when he does a slow, calculated once over of the obnoxious warlock who's clad in a dark purple suit, a black cloak draped on his shoulders. A ridiculous outfit, if one were to ask Taehyung.

Jimin's head twists to peer at Taehyung. "I never knew warlocks could be this pretty."

A silence stretches in the room disrupted by Junhyun's booming laughter, his hilarity echoed by Dahee and Namjoon. Jungkook is snickering in his hand while Taehyung is positively gawking at his best friend, his confidant, his *brother* , who dares betray Taehyung in such revolting manners.

So when Taehyung snarls — squeaks — Jimin's name, the word ends in a strangled, high intonation.

"I'm just saying," Jimin shrugs.

"Hey, Yoon." Jungkook pokes Yoongi's bicep. "Yoon, am I dreaming or you're blushing?"

"He's definitely blushing," Namjoon adds. "Oh my God."

Yoongi's scowl deepens but it's mellowed by the equally angry rose that tinges the apple of his cheeks and tip of his ears. "I'm not blushing."

Yoongi bickers with Jungkook and Namjoon, and Taehyung uses this moment of distraction to whisper in Jimin's ear.

"Are you out of your mind?" Taehyung hisses. "Don't fraternize with the enemy."

"He's *your* enemy, not mine," Jimin retorts with a quiet voice, then he continues loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room. "Plus, fighting with someone so beautiful would be such a pity, don't you think? A bonus point is that he seems to dislike you, which is a sentiment I share more often than not, and wouldn't it be a great subject for him and I to bond over?"

Jungkook bursts into laughter, leaning onto Namjoon for support. "Jimin, you're gonna kill him."

When Taehyung glances at the warlock, the man doesn't seem to be breathing: immobile and staring at Jimin with something akin to ashamed horror.

"I…" Yoongi starts but trails off.

Jimin, of course, does not miss the occasion to entirely rivet his attention on Yoongi. "You?"

"As entertaining as it is," Dahee begins and stands, "we must prepare for the wedding. Everyone has their garments in this room, while Taehyung and Jungkook will get ready on the third floor in your respective changing rooms."

"Oh yes, we should go." Jungkook meets Taehyung's gaze. "We'll meet at the back of the castle? We're supposed to leave together in our carriage."

"Yeah." Without any further ado, Taehyung snatches Jimin by the arm. "You're coming with me." He nods at his mother when she tells him where to find his room. Once out of earshot, Taehyung lets go of Jimin and says "I can't believe you."

“What? He’s a hundred percent my type. Nay, make it three hundred percent."

“Don’t make the Prince’s friend your new fling,” Taehyung warns. Jimin groans. “Jimin. I mean it. Don’t. It’s the last thing this arrangement needs.” Taehyung highly doubts Jungkook will take it nicely if Jimin is to have his ‘fun’ with Yoongi, and Taehyung would rather avoid this kind of unnecessary drama in his life.

“I won’t, I won’t, don’t worry. He glanced at me several times, so I wanted to tease him a bit. Seems like I’m also *his* type."

“That’s great but let’s keep it… professional.”

“‘Professional.’”

“You know what I mean. Don’t fuck around with the warlock.”

“Yes, yes,” Jimin dismisses with a wave of his hand before hooking it around Taehyung's arm. “What about you, though? You and Jungkook are on better terms, right? It seems a lot less tense than before.”

Taehyung had told his parents and Jimin about Jungkook. Nothing specific, and he had not mentioned anything regarding Jungkook's necromancy, but Taehyung had alleviated his family's concern. So while the overall ambiance has fallen back into its previous ease, Taehyung wouldn’t describe his and Jungkook’s relationship as one being in ‘better terms’.

“It’s how it was before the ring mess,” Taehyung discards.

“I’m so curious about what you found out.”

Taehyung doesn't provide more as they reach the empty changing room.

He heaves a deep sigh and sits on a loveseat.

“You’re feeling okay?” Jimin worries and plops down next to him.

“It hasn’t really sunk in that I’m about to be married to the Jeon dynasty Prince.” Not much has been processed by Taehyung’s mind for the past month, quite frankly. Taehyung has been going with the erratic flow that appears to become more and more untamed as the days go by.

“It’s a bit too late to backtrack now.”

“I know. I never said I will.” At least not recently.

Jimin’s hand cradles Taehyung’s as the two tighten their clasp. “I know it’s been a lot lately, but the worst part is tonight, and then everything will be more peaceful.”

Only Taehyung and his mother know that the worst has yet to come, but he nods anyway. “I’m not looking forward to being surrounded by humans.”

“If it gets too much, you tell me and I’ll create a distraction so you can dip out. It’ll be fine.” Jimin releases Taehyung’s hand to pat his thigh. “You’re not the only dragonborn. There are dozens of us, and most importantly, *I* am here, so if anyone tries anything fishy, I’ll burn them without blinking. Except the pretty warlock.”

Taehyung snorts, the knot in his chest loosening. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Not as much as you,” Jimin jests and Taehyung pinches his leg. “Now, chop chop. Your Prince is awaiting you.”

For his first apparel of the night, Taehyung has decided to wear a fully black outfit. First is a turtleneck in a sateen fabric that slides against his skin when he puts it on, and where it is loose at the waist, it tightens around his chest and shoulder. Second is the pair of trousers, the pants made of different layers of sateen and thin leather, surprisingly comfortable to wear due to Seokjin’s adjustments.

Jimin helps Taehyung style his hair that he slicks back, aside from the couple of strands that Jimin sculpts and adjusts on Taehyung’s forehead.

“You look really good. I like this touch.” Jimin fiddles with the short scarf fastened around Taehyung’s neck. It's topped with a golden necklace holding a diamond at the center of its bone-like shape.

A few more minutes go by.

Taehyung is folding the clothes he came in with when a sudden realization stops him in his tracks. He gasps and swivels around. “By the Elders.”

“What is it?”

“I’m gonna have to kiss the Prince.”

Jimin silently stares at Taehyung. “And?”

Taehyung marches toward Jimin to grip onto the lapels of his vest. “You’re experienced in this field. Teach me how to kiss. I’m not about to embarrass myself because I don’t know how to kiss.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how to kiss, Jimin,” Taehyung exclaims. “And I’m supposed to do that in front of *thousands* of people!”

Jimin wrenches himself free from Taehyung’s clamp. “I’m not teaching you. That’s disgusting.”

“I don’t mean a mouth to mouth demonstration. Are you insane?”

“Have you really never kissed anyone?”

“Yes, I haven’t.” Taehyung has never been in a relationship before to begin with, let alone kissed anyone.

“But there was a rumor that you kissed Woobin though."

“Hah?! I’d rather kiss Jungkook or a pile of shit than Woobin! *Woobin?!”* Taehyung makes a gagging noise.

Jimin rolls his eyes. “You’ll be fine. You know how to peck and that’s all you’ve gotta do: peck Jungkook, not make out with him. No one wants to see that.”

“Peck as in—” Taehyung grabs Jimin’s cheek to smash his lips against one of them. “Like that?”

“No. Put more sentiment in it, by the Elders. You’re not kissing Minsoo. You peck Jungkook but, like, it still has to be a kiss.”

“You make no goddamn sense.”

“I’ll show you.”

Jimin rummages around the room to find a piece of parchment that he balances on the edge of a table. He rests a candle on it to keep it in place as half of the paper sticks out. Then, he clasps his palm shut that he turns, forming some sort of duck’s beak. “Imagine that my hands are your lips, and that the paper is one of Jungkook’s lips. You do it like that.”

‘Like that’ is Jimin parting the tip of his fingers to close them around the paper, a solemn look on his face.

Taehyung pensively studies the motion, an arm crossed over his chest and a hand holding his chin. “I bite him?”

“You fucking dimwit.”

“I don’t get it.”

“With your lips, not your damn teeth.” Jimin reiterates the gesture. “You do that. You pinch Jungkook’s upper or lower lip. But don’t go too low or you’ll kiss his chin, and don’t go too high or you’ll be making out with his nostrils and let me tell you that this is an experience I don’t wish on anyone.”

“I pinch his lip?” Taehyung mutters to himself and he purses then sucks in his lips, trying to imitate what Jimin’s hands are doing.

“May the Elders give Jungkook the strength and patience. He’s utterly doomed with you.”

“I don’t get it,” Taehyung mumbles and walks closer to Jimin. “Help me.”

“I am helping you! You do that! Like that!”

“What do you mean by ‘that’?!” Taehyung slaps his hand together, the same way Jimin is on the paper. “That doesn’t mean jackshit!"

“I told you to pretend my hands are your lips and the paper is Jungkook’s! It’s not that difficult, you stupid ass!”

“You’re the stupid ass with your stupid paper! Teach me how to fucking kiss!”

They’ve reached a point where they’re both yelling and clapping at each other, and this is how Dahee finds them when she enters the room.

Taehyung and Jimin both freeze in place in front of the paper, their beak-like hands pointed at each other.

Dahee arches a brow. “Do I want to know?”

“Taehyung is an idiot.” Jimin yanks the paper to crumple it into a ball that he throws at Taehyung’s head.

“He’s being an idiot regarding…?” Dahee asks and closes the door.

“First of all, you could have denied, Mom. Second of all, I don’t know how to kiss,” Taehyung mutters.

Dahee chuckles, prompting a scowl on Taehyung. She walks up to him and assesses his attire while readjusting the collar of his turtleneck. “It’ll naturally come to you, do not fret, Son. You only have to kiss him once at the ceremony.”

Taehyung deflates. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“Jungkook is ready. Your father and I will leave with Jimin in a second carriage after the Queen and King,” Dahee explains. She cradles Taehyung’s face to have him lean forward and pecks his forehead. “Everything will be fine, my son. Let us hurry.” She strides toward Jimin and leads him outside the room, Taehyung following suit.

Aside from Yoongi and Namjoon; Junhyun, Jungkook and his parents are awaiting Taehyung.

As Jungkook had said, his and Taehyung’s apparels match while contrasting. Where Taehyung is fully dressed in black, Jungkook is bearing a white, four piece suit accentuated by golden touches similar to Taehyung’s, like the buttons of the vest or the jewelry adorning the Prince’s neck and ears.

Jungkook takes in Taehyung's appearance as much as Taehyung does. “You look good.”

Taehyung hums, a sound that is a half dismissal, half a *‘Thank you’.*

“Jungkook, Taehyung,” the Queen starts, "you must make your departure now. Your carriage awaits you, and so do our people.”

The Queen continues to give directions, whether it being to Taehyung’s family or the helpers. Jungkook watches her with a contempt that he seemingly does not try to hide — or one that Taehyung easily reads, somehow.

Taehyung and Jungkook soon find themselves alone in their carriage, facing one another, and it’s only then that Taehyung speaks up. “What is it?”

Jungkook’s gaze shifts on Taehyung from where it had been drifting outside the window. “Hm?”

“The Queen said something?”

Jungkook chuckles, bitter, muffled by the carriage's wheels and galloping of the horses. “She said many, *many* things.”

“Like?” Taehyung probes. The annoyance wavers, not directed at Jungkook for once.

“ *‘You must nurture this arrangement, Jungkook. Do not disappoint me or your father again’* ,” Jungkook quotes and his voice takes a higher and more clipped tone in a perfect rendition of the Queen. “ *‘If the Kim son is to be displeased by your behavior, we will consort with Seungwon once more’* . She said, among other things of the same waver.”

“Ah, yes. Threats: a wonderful wedding gift."

“I wouldn’t expect any less from her.”

“What about your father?”

“He warned me of the same thing, but less tactfully. Let’s just say that if something is to happen to our marriage, I’ve come to terms with the fact that I’ll become a renegade prince who will then try to overthrow Amaris' rulers.”

Taehyung thinks back on the request Jungkook had made some time ago. “I guess we’ll have to give her a believable enough show to shut her mouth for good.” He's peering out the window but he can feel Jungkook’s gaze on him.

“Thank you…”

Jungkook still sounds sullen, and it bothers Taehyung for some reasons. So Taehyung summons his lightning to shoot a zap on Jungkook’s chest.

Jungkook jolts with a yelp. “Ow! That hurts!”

“No, it doesn't."

“I said ‘ow’,” Jungkook repeats with a jut of his chin.

“Stop being so moody. I’m supposed to be the sour one, not you.”

Jungkook snorts. His smile looks more genuine this time. "I almost forgot my role, apologies.” He tugs the small windows’ curtains shut and says “Want to come out?”

The basilisk materializes outside of the necklace and on Jungkook’s shoulders. The snake sniffs the air, her tongue darting out. She glances at Taehyung then at Jungkook and she bumps her snout against Jungkook’s nose, Jungkook nuzzling her head back.

Taehyung slumps down in his seat and he closes his eyes, hoping to catch some rest.

“…yung… Hyung… Taehyung.”

Taehyung jolts awake, disoriented when met with Jungkook’s face and a hand shaking his knee.

“We almost arrived. Our parents already made their entrance through the avenue and are seated on the balcony. We’re next in a few minutes.”

Taehyung curses as he straightens up. He works the kinks out of his body and stretches his arms above his head with a yawn. “Didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“You probably needed it.”

Taehyung hums. He rubs at his eyes and readjusts his clothes. He pats his cheeks and shakes his head but when it doesn't suffice to fend off the remnants of somnolence, he zaps himself awake.

"Ready?" Jungkook wonders after a brief moment, the basilisk gone. Taehyung nods. "I'll open the curtains so we can wave at our people."

Taehyung bristles at the 'our'.

"Yeah." He slides open the curtains of the left windows while Jungkook does the same with the right ones.

The avenue is large and paved in smoothed stones, raised sittings along with rows of candelabra lining up the road and leading to the outdoor amphitheater where the spectacle will unfold.

The screams blare through Taehyung's ears, the exclamations elated and jumbled together.

Many yell Jungkook's name as the latter leans out the window to wave at the cheering people. Some congratulate them for the wedding, and, to Taehyung's shock, a few shout Taehyung's name with nothing that resembles scorn.

Taehyung glances out the window and he sees some dragonborns amidst the sea of humans, noticeable with their horns or wings out. One even throws a fireball in the sky that shifts into the shape of a heart.

Taehyung huffs, amused, while Jungkook emits a small chuckle.

After some self encouragement in the form of another zap, Taehyung shuffles forward so the two of them are leaning outside and greeting the masses. Taehyung does his best to put up a good front; his smile may be small but it's present, an occurrence he deems as more than enough. At least no one can see the tremors in his hands from where they're entangled between his knees.

Jungkook shouts back some *'Thank you!'* and *'Thank you for joining us tonight!'* , each one punctuated by a dip of his head. His eyes are bright, and he must recognize some people in the crowd because he responds with some names back accompanied with *'Take care!'* or an *'I'll visit soon again!'*

It takes a while to drive down the avenue.

Once they reach the wide plaza, Taehyung can see the building facing them that Jungkook clarifies as being some kind of second citadel, this one however opened to the public at all times. An imperial staircase branches in two, joining at the middle to where the balcony is, all made of light gray stones similar to the rest of the avenue.

Seohyung, Sungmin, Jimin and Taehyung's parents are all settled on the platform.

They stand at Taehyung and Jungkook's arrival. The carriage comes to a halt at the coachman's command. A servant clad in a black suit opens the door for them.

Taehyung does not waste a second to climb out, and he immediately senses the watchful gaze Seohyung levels them with. So Taehyung begins the act. He opens the door wider for Jungkook, and with a small bow, he presents his hand to the Prince who takes it with an amused smile, but the gratefulness in his gaze isn't lost on Taehyung.

Taehyung and Jungkook walk toward the stairs while the carriage disappears in a secluded path adjacent to the citadel.

The first conundrum of the day manifests itself: Taehyung doesn't know how to hold Jungkook.

Should Jungkook be the one holding him to begin with? And if yes, should Taehyung present his elbow to Jungkook? Or maybe his hand? Or perhaps he could simply—

A hand curls around Taehyung's bicep while a shoulder bumps into his. "Is this okay?" Jungkook whispers before creating a tad more distance between them.

"Yeah."

They reach the top of the perron where an elevated stone podium awaits them, along with two chairs that look more like ostentatious thrones with their golden armatures and black leather cushions, elevated higher than the rest of their family's seats. Taehyung sits down, Jungkook on his right.

Dozens of thousands of people populate the amphitheater and raised sittings of the avenue. Everything is grandiose: the balcony Taehyung and Jungkook are in, the orchestra below them lining the amphitheater's sides, or the citadel behind them. It's intimidating, and no matter how open the place is with the sky above his head, it still feels suffocating.

Taehyung's hands are wrenched around the armrests of his throne. His heart speeds up and he knows it's foolish to think so now — *so belatedly* —, however he can't help but wonder if it is all a trap.

He's outnumbered. His *family* is. And so are the other dragonborns who have flown to Amaris for the ceremony. They could effortlessly kill the humans crowding the area if they were to shift into their dragon counterpart, but it could become an impossible goal to achieve if warlocks intervene, or if humans use the appropriate weaponry to subdue a dragon.

Taehyung's throat clicks when he swallows. Perspiration blooms on his nape, and the cold sweat that creeps up his back elicits a shiver that he thankfully manages to repress.

Something nudges his temple, as though a solid ball of air has bumped against him. When he peers at where it has come from, he sees the smile on his father's lips. Dahee is smiling as well, mouthing a *'You're safe'* at him while Jimin surveys him with a worried look.

A loud blast startles him before he can utter a single word. Taehyung's eyes dart around to find the source of the noise. Lost in his own spiraling thoughts, he had not noticed the additional carriages that had parked.

A melodious tune begins to play, the notes slow and drawn out. It gains in speed before decelerating, however always graceful and mystical.

Taehyung feels a hand on his wrist.

Jungkook's.

"Look up," Jungkook instructs.

Taehyung does.

There are five dragons in the sky forming a circle and hovering in place, but it isn't what prompts Taehyung's mouth to open around a noise of surprise.

It's the ribbons elegantly fastened around the dragons' back talons: red and spiraling down and down in an intricate crisscross. They seem endless until Taehyung's eyes drop on the person dangling at the bottom of each ribbon, suspended in the air and yards away from the ground. A total of ten humans are held by the dragons, all drawing graceful aerial acrobatics.

The night sky is darkening by now, dusted with muted purple and orange hues. It mingles so beautifully with the dancers dressed in a white garments, but also with the candelabras that illuminate the public circle where other dancers are performing, casting golden tinges on their clothes.

The acrobats twist and turn, coiled around the ribbons at a high point only to tumble down. Taehyung straightens up when he thinks they will fall and crash on the ground, however they catch themselves just in time; each wrap of the ribbon around a leg or an arm is purposefully made.

A group of over a dozen men and women come out from the archway where the carriages are hidden. They skip to the center of the place, right at the core of the aerial dancers and dragons. They begin to perform as well, the ballet dancers shifting on their toes and coiling silky bands around them that seem alive, with a will of their own.

The aerial acrobats join the dancers on the ground at some point, starting a new dance together. The dragons fly in a circle above them, the dangling ribbons on their talons encasing them in an ever moving column of red threads.

It's breathtaking.

Taehyung doesn't know for how long he admires the spectacle, enraptured in the undulating ribbons and pirouettes.

The dancers form a circle as they come to a standstill, the dichotomy of red and white constant and harmonious. The ribbons are all joined at the middle, them and the dancers creating some kind of flower.

A croak erupts from above. When Taehyung looks up, he notices a raven flying closer to them. It looks strange, the shapes and edges akin to—

"Oh," Jungkook exhales.

Taehyung realizes two matters at once: 1) the raven is made of ink, 2) Jungkook is still holding onto his wrist, the golden jewelry adorning Jungkook's fingers cold against Taehyung's skin, but Taehyung is too absorbed by the spectacle to snatch his hand away from Jungkook's.

The raven dives toward where the ribbons are joined and bursts outward in a splatter. The ink spreads across the ribbons, then the dancers' garments, dyeing the red and white in jet black.

Seconds later, small wings peek from the dancers' shoulder blades, turning into ravens that fly off. Soon, the ink birds all merge into one, growing into a large raven that could rival the size of a dragon.

Jungkook murmurs an *'Oh my God'* while Taehyung blurts a *'By the Elders'* .

The grand raven’s wings are dripping with ink as it drifts toward the balcony and pauses in front of Taehyung and Jungkook. It looks at them, Taehyung first, then Jungkook. Jungkook’s hand leaves Taehyung’s wrist to inch near the raven’s beak. The jewelry gleam under the moon and candles’ light when Jungkook caresses the raven’s beak, and the bird suddenly erupts back into the dozens of smaller ravens.

The music slows down, only the violins and piano embellishing the silence.

The dancers all form a line and face the balcony. They kneel on one knee, each receiving a raven that lands on their hand. The birds of ink lose their shape as they melt, the ink sliding down the dancers' forearms in a makeshift glove.

Then, they slam their inked palm on the ground. The ink explodes and slowly begins to shape into an elongated , slithering band, round at one end.

Jungkook emits a pleased chuckle next to Taehyung, a misty mirth swimming in his eyes when Taehyung glances at him. Jungkook clutches his necklace that fluctuates with black hues.

Darkness and silence suddenly fills the place, the candles snuffed out and dancers gone.

A boom breaks through the quietude, one of a dragon, that commands everyone’s attention on the night sky peppered with stars, but most importantly dragons.

Akin to how the spectacle had started, the dragons dance and fly with one another. Most are quiet, but a few sing, their voices carrying across the amphitheater and land as a whole.

Goosebumps flare on Taehyung’s arms, and the pride he experiences squeezes at his throat as he witnesses the beauty of dragonkind, the sheer power that exudes from every bat of wing or twist of a horned head.

Two dragons begin to fly down the avenue. One of them breathes a gust of leaves that coalesces with the cone of fire the second dragon releases. The leaves burn and fall from the sky in shimmering embers, like a rain of harmless fire drops. Before they can harm any of the spectators, the leaves are swept away by the wind a third dragon breathes.

Taehyung observes Amaris' people.

Rather than fear, an unadulterated awe paints their faces as their hands extend toward the sky to fruitlessly try to catch some of the burnt leaves, shielded by the wind dragonborn.

The song continues, powerful yet delicate.

Taehyung peers at Jungkook again, compelled to do so for reasons he cannot comprehend.

Tears are trickling down Jungkook's cheeks, clinging onto his chin before falling, moved in ways Taehyung relates too as his own eyes prickle.

Lanterns and lotuses of ink now litter the ground.

Taehyung frowns to himself. He does not recall anything about this.

The dancers are gone, replaced instead by two dozen of humans — archers — and another of dragonborns, all dressed in white, the dragonborns recognizable by the dragon scales

shoulderplates they're wearing.

Yoongi stands at the circle they form around him.

Then, and following the series of elegant waves of his hands, the lanterns and lotuses lift in the air.

The archers aim their bows at them while the dragonborns curl a hand in front of their mouths. The humans draw their bows and they let go, the arrows shooting toward the ink lanterns and lotuses. They're intercepted half way through by the small fireballs the dragonborns direct at them, lighting the tip of the arrows that bores inside the lanterns and at the core of the lotuses.

The lanterns and lotuses lighten, now floating in the sky in an array of orange, red and white from the different types of fires the dragonborns have used.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Jungkook murmurs.

Taehyung does not even try to deny it. "It is."

Some of the lanterns and lotuses dotting the sky follow the same patterns the ravens had as they melt together in a wavering black sphere. The archers aim their bows at it and this time, when the fire arrows lodge inside it, it explodes into a firework of symmetrical shapes that grow less and less sharp as the seconds elapse.

They draw something, Taehyung notices: the head of a dragon, then the rest of the body with the wings and spiky tail, the black of the ink lightened by the dragonborns' fires coalescing with it. Another figure appears in the sky, this time of a human looking up at the dragon and holding a lotus in their raised hand.

A movement catches Taehyung's attention on his right.

Jungkook stands and walks to the balcony's railing, which is odd in itself amidst the spectacle. Neither he or Taehyung are supposed to be part of this spectacle. An ebony arrow and bow dangle from Jungkook's hand, the wood engraved with golden lining at the middle and on the ends.

Jungkook takes the arrow and slots it against the bow. He turns sideways, directing the bow high up.

He draws the string, waits for a few seconds, then he shoots.

The arrow neatly drives in the sky. It effortlessly pierces through the ink hand of the human shape and the lotus that bursts into flames and ink in a last, ending firework.

The people somehow realize before Taehyung that the show has come to an end because they break into cheers and clapping as they spring on their feet. Dahee, Junhyun and Sungmin do so as well, aside from the Queen who belatedly joins the celebration, her glare born into the back of Jungkook's head.

Taehyung straightens up, distractedly applauding. Jungkook bows to the archers, dancers and dragonborns filling the plaza before making his way back to his seat and leaving his bow to a servant.

"You weren't supposed to do that, were you?" Taehyung asks when Jungkook is near him, his voice drowned by the endless clapping and cheers.

“Nope,” Jungkook answers, his gaze mischievous.

Taehyung can't repress his chuckle this time.

Bells ring after a while, announcing the performers who greet the people at the amphitheater and in the raised sitting. Taehyung and Jungkook, along with their parents, take this opportunity to walk down the podium's stairs and disappear in the path where their carriages await them.

The Queen does not wait to be out of earshot from any passerby to rush toward Jungkook and snare his arm. “Why have you changed the ending of the spectacle? We had agreed on something else entirely.”

“Because the lotus being on the dragon’s forehead and a human archer aiming at it could have sent the wrong message to Vanae’s people,” Jungkook retorts, staring down at the Queen.

“You were not supposed to be drawing the arrow either. Yoongi was.”

“Change of heart."

“You—”

“It is done now. There is no point in discussing this any further,” Sungmin intervenes with a hand on Seohyung’s back. Seohyung shrugs him off and strides toward her carriage. “Careful, Jungkook. Do not forget your place as Amaris’ Prince.”

A saccharine smile curls Jungkook’s lips. “Of course.”

Seohyung and Sungmin leave.

A silence lulls, one that Junhyun, as he often does, disrupts. “Well, if anything, us and the rest of dragonkind have definitely appreciated the change."

“I found it more befitting to pierce the once betraying hand,” Jungkook admits.

Dahee approves with a bob of her head and a gentle hold of Jungkook's arm. “Let us make our departure as well.”

“Come on,” Taehyung says to Jungkook with a nod toward their carriage. Instead of climbing into it, he opens the door to let Jungkook get in before him.

“Oh my,” Jungkook gasps with a hand on his chest, “what a gentleman.”

“This gentleman will smack the door on your ass if you don’t hurry it up.” Taehyung catches the way their coachman looks taken aback by his retort. Jungkook laughs and climbs in the carriage, Taehyung next.

Taehyung doesn’t mean to stare at Jungkook, but he does so with a muted shock.

Taehyung had known how involved Jungkook had been with the wedding, particularly with the spectacle, made evident with Jungkook’s absence from the house, and with the few times Taehyung had seen him plan out the ceremony on the coffee table. However Taehyung had never even imagined that Jungkook would make such an effort to include dragonborns with so much care and respect.

“The actual ceremony is next. It shouldn’t take too long,” Jungkook says, tearing Taehyung away from his meandering thoughts. “As for the feast and after-party, what I said before still stands,” he carries on, his gaze finding Taehyung’s. “If there’s a human you don’t like there, you can tell me, and I’ll have them be escorted out.”

Taehyung peers at the night sky, only noting then that the spectacle has lasted for nearly an hour. “I haven’t seen Seungwon in the crowd.”

“Me either,” Jungkook sighs. “Seohyung held onto her words.”

“Let’s hope it lasts.”

The remainder of the ride is quiet, saved for the instances where Jungkook converses with the basilisk.

They reach an area not too far from the castle half an hour or so later. The carriage stops. Taehyung and Jungkook descend.

A large white tent blocks the view.

The dressing affair is prompt, but it takes an hour for the people to move location and settle down where the vows will be given. Taehyung and Jungkook are preparing themselves in separate areas of the tent, Jungkook aided by an armada of maids, while Taehyung has chosen to be on his own, refusing anyone’s help.

Taehyung changes into his second apparel of the night: a black shirt, trousers and shiny leather vest adorning him, all quite tight fitting to accommodate the intricate, thin golden armor he slides on and readjusts on the shoulders. While his garment may be considered as distasteful by humans, wearing armor has always been an important tradition of a dragonborn's marriage.

The headpiece is next, handmade by Jimin, and it is absolutely gorgeous. Taehyung admires it from every angle, reminding himself to send some extra coin to Jimin, before attaching it on his head. a jewelry that hangs over his forehead, the chain starting from the middle and branching out to the temples. A replica of the upper part of a dragon's skull serves as a makeshift crown, framed by ebony half circles, golden buttons and two black horns.

Taehyung could have summoned his own horns, but the sole idea of having out one of his dragon’s traits had agitated him.

Once satisfied with his appearance, and after grabbing Jungkook’s gifts, Taehyung makes his way through a corridor leading to a smaller tent.

“Taehyung, by the Elders,” Junhyun widely smiles. He pulls Taehyung into a tight embrace that he breaks moments later. “You look stunning, my son. Jimin has done astounding work.”

Taehyung smiles at the remark. “He has. Everything is so lovely.”

“Sir, the guests and people are seated,” a maid says as she enters the tent. “The ceremony may begin.”

Taehyung heavily sighs.

Without much thinking, he marches toward the two white curtains concealing him.

The silence is unnerving considering the amount of people most likely surrounding the venue and crowding the garden around it.

The human maid and a dragonborn man both stand in front of the curtains, a hand holding onto the hem. When Taehyung nods, they part the curtain open, and the orchestra begins to play.

Taehyung is greeted by the well trimmed grass and the rows of metal benches and green cushions. A metal armature is hoisted above his head, acting as an open roof displaying the night sky, vines and white flowers curling around the curved metal bands, as well as a large tree behind the altar. Lanterns dangle everywhere, lighting up the area and the 300 guests seated in front of the altar, along with the raised sittings framing occupied by most of Amaris' people.

Some dragons hover in the sky, and Taehyung's anxiousness mellows down a little at the sight.

Junhyun presents his elbow to Taehyung. Taehyung grips onto his father’s arm, the two of them walking down the aisle. Taehyung smiles when he passes by his mother and Jimin — his grandfather Minsoo is absent, as he had anticipated.

With one last squeeze on his father’s arm, he lets go to poise himself at the center of a perfectly drawn circle.

Taehyung shuffles to have the aisle before him, hands folded around Jungkook’s gifts behind his back.

The curtains fall shut.

He can hear the faint buzz of curiosity that elevates in the venue as the humans take in his apparel that must be eons away from human wedding garments.

Taehyung counts in his head while he waits.

His gaze is fixed where Jungkook will appear in a few seconds, refusing to look away as to not encourage himself in his urge to escape the ceremony and marriage as a whole. His palms clam up and he blames his nervousness on being surrounded by humans, rather than on an anticipation that has not its place to be when Taehyung has no care for this union.

Yet, as the curtains are pulled open, Taehyung holds his breath.

While the reactions at Taehyung’s appearance had been tamed, those at Jungkook’s are less restrained. Gasps erupt here and there, a rush of whispers courses through the crowd, echoed by some dragons' rumbling. Taehyung can relate to the shock that colors the people’s faces, whether it being humans or dragonborns; commoners or influential families.

The very few who don’t seem bewildered are Dahee and Jimin who stand as well, watching Amaris’ heir to the throne make his way up the aisle.

Unlike Taehyung’s apparel that is more of a second protective skin, what Jungkook has put on resembles a long, heavy looking winter cloak with layers upon layers of fabric trailing behind him. He’s wearing a vest that is tight fitting on the chest but parts open past the hip on a pair of black trousers. Where Taehyung’s garment is of black and gold, Jungkook’s is of black and silver, the cloak adorned with embroideries in the shape of feathers

Taehyung’s gaze darts on Jungkook’s face, and he can’t hide his own surprise.

The headpiece is a dragonborn tradition, one that Taehyung had not expected to be respected, let alone followed.

Taehyung exhales when he surveys the edges of the headpiece Jungkook is wearing, a perfect copy of Taehyung’s, only differing when it comes to the colors: of black and red, with touches of silver.

By the ire that twists Seohyung and Sungmin's faces, Taehyung guesses that the headpiece is another one of those secrets Jungkook had kept away from his parents.

Taehyung’s mouth clicks shut. He's been gawking at the regal Prince for far too long, enough for him to startle when Jungkook reaches the altar and halts in front of him.

With a tentative gaze, Taehyung traces the soft curve of Jungkook's nose, of his cheeks that every so slightly bunches up around a smile. Then Taehyung paused at sharp edges of Jungkook's eyes, ornated by the white lines, curls and a series of thinning dots on the lower lid. He smells like flowers too, dampened by this grim aspect that Taehyung only comprehends now to be due to his necromancy.

However, there’s a distracting, uncommon hint that floats in the air.

A tinge of strawberry.

Taehyung’s eyes dart on Jungkook’s lips. They’re pink, as usual — not that Taehyung has been watching them enough to know what they commonly look like —, but he is aware that they usually don’t have a faint shine on them.

Jungkook’s lips pinch to visibly bite back a smile.

Taehyung’s eyes narrow as they lock with Jungkook’s playful ones, and realization hits him: Jungkook has put on some damn *strawberry flavored lip balm.*

“Fucking brat,” Taehyung whispers.

Jungkook lifts a hand to cover his mouth as his shoulders shake around a quiet laugh.

Taehyung’s attention is diverted from Jungkook’s impudence by the arrival of the wedding officiant.

He shouldn’t gape like a fucking idiot at the familiar face, but when he recognizes who the older woman is, Taehyung’s brows fly up his forehead.

The woman’s hair is gray and long, knitted into a braid peppered with golden jewelry. She's wearing a kind smile as she pauses next to Taehyung and Jungkook. The woman arches a brow at Taehyung who promptly schools his expression.

One of the Elders is *officiating his wedding* which is both astonishing and alarming.

When the Elder speaks, her voice booms through the place, effortlessly carrying over the people in the raised sitting. “Please, be seated,” she instructs, and everyone follows the demand. “People of Amaris, people of Vanae, and people from all around Aurora, welcome, and thank you for joining us on this noble day.”

Taehyung braces himself while Jungkook straightens his back. They both peer at the officiant.

“We are gathered here to celebrate the union between two families born from a sorrowful past, yet willing to put all aside in favor of consolidating the peace.”

Taehyung's teeth grit, the extent of what he allows to transpire of his feelings regarding Amaris and Vanae’s union.

“Pardon can be painless to say, however heavier to truly mean and prove,” the Elder carries on, “and this wedding is the greatest display of mutual forgiveness, both of dragonborns toward humans, and humans toward dragonborns.”

It takes all of Taehyung self-control to not bark out a derisive laugh at the last part.

He had expected for the ceremony and vows to be short and concise, as he and Jungkook had agreed upon. However a silly little speech has to be given beforehand, *of course,* one that places humans and dragonborns on the same level even though humans were always the one to instigate wars.

Taehyung’s eyes fall on Jungkook, the latter unreadable.

“We all wish to prosper; live a prolific, fulfilling life. May Kim Taehyung and Jeon Jungkook’s union of marriage provide all of that and more for Vanae and Amaris’ people.”

Quiet clapping elevates when the Elder pauses.

“Now, as per the mingle of human and dragonborns customs, we shall begin with the respective gift and pendant exchange,” the Elders smiles as she surveys Taehyung and Jungkook. “Jeon Jungkook, Kim Taehyung, you may offer each other's present”

Jungkook rummages in an inner pocket of his cloak from which he retrieves a dark, long wooden box. Taehyung’s own gifts for the Prince sit heavy between his fingers, and when Jungkook extends the box forward, Taehyung hands the Prince his gift.

“Kim Taehyung, if you would like to open your gift first,” the Elder says when neither Taehyung nor Jungkook budge.

Taehyung unfastens the black ribbon around the wooden box and slides the lid open. A noncommittal sound catches at the back of his throat and, embarrassingly enough, it resounds through the air just like the Elder’s voice due to the arcane that helps carry their voices to everyone in the vicinity.

There’s a hunting knife laying on a dark velvet cushion.

Taehyung takes it to twist it this and that way, contemplating the engravings on the sheath and handle that aren’t painting any particular patterns, but the designs are elegant and sharp, of blue gray with hints of gold. Taehyung unsheathes it. The blade is of a silver color, acute when Taehyung runs it along his finger and draws a drop of blood. Te doesn’t mean to be a maniacal ass at his own wedding — he does —, but he skillfully twirls the knife between his fingers to test its weight. It's comfortably balanced.

“Jimin helped me with it,” Jungkook clarifies, which explains the knife's pristine quality. “I asked him to make it light, yet sturdy enough to feel heavy and have a good grasp.”

Taehyung knows that he should thank the Prince, but he can’t bring himself to do so regardless of how pleased he is with the gift. Thankfully, and before it can grow awkward as Taehyung debates on what to say, Jungkook speaks.

“May I open mine? I’m impatient.” Jungkook's light chuckle floats in the air.

“Of course,” the Elder answers.

Jungkook unfolds the cloth wrapped around his present. It displays the book bound in leather with a sewed band at the front that serves as an ink vial and quill holder. “Oh.” He glances at Taehyung then peers at the book again. The box adjoined to it is next, holding at its center a quill made from a griffin’s feather, smaller ones framing the bottom. A white ribbon is also attached around the lower part of the quill, both to keep everything in place as well as make it more comfortable to write with.

Taehyung has made the quill himself after stumbling on the feather during a hunt. He had then bought the book and screwed in the vial holder at the front. While tinkering with feathers isn’t his forte, he’s quite content with what he has managed to create.

Jungkook looks up at Taehyung again. His eyes, so open and honest, are full of a palpable surprise echoed by an evident happiness.

Taehyung averts his gaze.

“It’s— It’s perfect… Thank you,” Jungkook whispers, his voice wavering at the end.

As per human tradition, additionally to the gift exchange, it is the best men who retrieve the gifts from the marrying couple to keep safe until the end of the ceremony, and so Yoongi and Jimin stand to take the hunting knife, book and quill.

“I’ll be careful to not spill the vial of ink on this one,” Jungkook says with a teasing smile and tilt of his head.

Taehyung’s reply is reflexive.

“Fuck off.”

Except that Taehyung had forgotten the Elder’s continuous arcane, meaning that every single person in the venue has heard Taehyung curse to Amaris’ prince at their *wedding*.

Chuckles and snickers erupt everywhere and when he glances at his parents, Dahee is sporting a chastising glower while Junhyun and Jimin are holding back their laughter.

Taehyung clears his throat.

“Now that Kim Taehyung and Jeon Jungkook have exchanged their gratitude, one perhaps in a more… unexpected fashion,” Elder Miseon adds, the laughter growing louder before quietening, “you may give each other your pendant, as per dragonborn tradition.” She raises her hands, a cushion placed in each palm with a necklace resting on it.

At first, Taehyung had vociferated when his parents had mentioned this tradition, but Taehyung had known that he had to comply eventually no matter how the idea of giving a part of his dragon form to a human had outraged him. It had taken sleepless nights before he had managed to remove one of his scales to pierce the round part and slide the thin, golden chain through it.

As such, eager to expedite this part of the ceremony, Taehyung takes the pendant and fastens it around Jungkook's neck. He scrutinizes the way his pearly, iridescent scale clashes against the black of Jungkook's vest. Taehyung swallows the bile that rises at the back of his throat.

Jungkook doesn't have scales, obviously, yet dangling at the bottom of the gold chain he lifts is what *looks* like a scale, of a deep red intersected by waves of black, like a sea of blood and ink.

Jungkook's fingers don't touch Taehyung's skin when they attach the pendant. He's quick too, closing the clasp in a matter of seconds.

To say that the necklace feels burdensome would be an understatement. Taehyung will have to get used to wearing it on a daily basis. Pendants exchanged between two dragonborns are sacred — even if it is more of a curse right now — and if Taehyung is to be seen without it by a dragonborn, most would think he and the Prince have broken off the engagement.

"Without any further ado…" The Elder gives the cushions to Jimin and Namjoon when they walk up to take them.

Jimin hands the Elder another small pillow, this one holding the rings.

This is it, Taehyung thinks as the officiant makes another speech.

He's about to be married to a human, the Jeon dynasty's heir and a *necromancer,* as if it does not suffice. Taehyung will be forever tied in a loveless marriage with the kind he hates the most. Sacrifices have to be made, after all. It isn't the first time that Taehyung has to give up something in order to become a good leader, and now his happiness and freedom is next.

At least this time it's willingly so.

The urge to run away grows. It's almost great enough to have him turn and flee, but he stands on his ground, even as his armor feels like a flimsy piece of tissue amidst the thousands of eyes riveted on him. Even as his skin crawls when he sees the scale hanging off Jungkook's neck. Even as his gaze collides with Jungkook's, who seems a lot more assured than Taehyung feels.

However Taehyung can help his people through this marriage, perhaps find some clues toward curing the plague, and with this thought in mind, he focuses back on the Elder's voice.

Jungkook's attention also appears to be drifting, however. He's staring somewhere behind Elder Miseon, at a point in the raised sitting. Taehyung glances in the same direction.

Seungwon is installed amidst one of the rows, Woobin by his side.

Jungkook's gaze snaps on Taehyung. The fury in them is betrayed by how the muscles of Jungkook's jaw shift under his skin, no matter how emotionless his expression is.

"Jeon Jungkook," the Elder begins, "do you take Kim Taehyung to be your husband? Do you promise to protect and honor him, in power and weakness, in health and sickness, in wealth and

poverty, until death do you apart?”

Jungkook does not hesitate, his eyes not straying away from Taehyung’s. “I do.”

“Kim Taehyung, do you take Jeon Jungkook to be your husband? Do you promise to protect and honor him, in power and weakness, in health and sickness, in wealth and poverty, until death do you apart?”

If Taehyung wants to run away, it's now or never.

However he does not, no matter how much he desires to.

“I do."

“Jeon Jungkook, place the ring on Kim Taehyung’s hand.”

Taehyung raises his hand as Jungkook takes the ring. The jewelry has a round ruby at the top that reminds Taehyung of the basilisk’s eyes, and he wouldn't put it past Jungkook to have chosen this gem for this specific reason.

“With this ring,” Jungkook starts and slides the golden band on Taehyung’s ring finger, “I, Jeon Jungkook, pledge all that is mine is yours, all that is yours is mine, and promise to cherish you today, tomorrow, and forevermore.”

“Kim Taehyung, place the ring on Jeon Jungkook’s hand.”

Taehyung had chosen a ring with a diamond framed by smaller round ones and black opals, the band of a white gold. He hadn’t put much thought into it, but the very few he had had led to commission a ring with both sharp and curved angles, a dichotomy that he had found befitting for the brazen prince.

Taehyung takes the ring.

He grabs a hold of Jungkook’s left hand.

His words are impassive when he utters them, his voice devoid of any sentiment. “With this ring, I, Kim Taehyung, pledge all that is mine is yours, all that is yours is mine, and promise to cherish you today, tomorrow, and forevermore.”

“By the power vested upon me,” the Elder says once Taehyung has passed the ring around Jungkook’s finger, “I now pronounce Jeon Jungkook and Kim Taehyung married.”

Jungkook is about to retract his hand, however Taehyung’s fingers tighten around him.

Jungkook emits an inquiring sound. "What is it?"

“Wait."

There’s another tradition between dragonborns regarding the exchange of rings, and it’s one that Taehyung will respect no matter his lack of love for the man he is marrying.

Taehyung closes his eyes to visualize the imaginary roulette and arrow of his arcane. He only partially holds back his arcane, allowing it to run free through the area as he listens to the wind

howling through the vines and metal armatures. Clothes and hair are rustled, Jungkook’s cloak undulating behind him.

Then, Taehyung selects another one of his breaths. This time, his body warms up, flames soon licking out of his mouth and retracting on his back to allow them to mingle with the wind without burning his now husband. They swirl near the ground before flickering higher and higher.

The sky had been clear up till now, however clouds begin to loom over the guests where the warm wind meets the freezing winter air. Taehyung feeds them more heat with his wind in a continuous cycle, and when he deems the clouds dense enough, he extinguishes his fire to summon his lightning instead.

He brings Jungkook's hands higher, close to his mouth. Taehyung watches the goosebumps pebbling the skin as finger-like tendrils dance atop where Taehyung and Jungkook’s fingers meet.

Initially, Taehyung had not meant to make a show of his arcane when he had pondered on what type of breath to implement in the diamond of Jungkook’s ring, however Seungwon’s presence is still fresh in Taehyung’s mind. The pig of a dragonborn is here, *watching,* and Taehyung might as well send a message that even a buffoon can grasp.

Taehyung's head dips backward. He lifts a hand and forms a ring in front of his mouth to breathe out a large cone of lightning. It loudly crackles and crawls up to the sky, the tendrils wildly snapping in each and any direction and burning some of the vines before disappearing amidst the clouds.

A palpable awe subsists in Jungkook’s eyes when Taehyung glances at him. Jungkook tilts his head back to peer up, Taehyung doing the same once more.

Once the lightning has spread across the clouds, Taehyung unleashes the potency in it.

Thunder booms. Lightning flashes in the clouds. Soon enough, a drop falls. Then a second, a third, and more, and he should have probably been more mindful of the rain he’d induce on the people, but Taehyung shrugs off the belated thought. Storms have always been comforting for him, especially when he’s the eye of one.

The pitter-patter of the rain elevates in the quiet venue. The drizzle is warm, kept heated by Taehyung's fire.

Some drops land on Jungkook’s face. The water mingles with the paint of the white dot to trails down Jungkook’s cheek in a silver tear. He presents his free palm to the sky, and smiles. He begins to laugh, closing his eyes as he further tilts his head back to let the rain wash across his face. He looks happy. *Free.*

A quiet rush of cheers runs through the crowd.

The scent of petrichor suffuses Taehyung’s senses, mingling with Jungkook's unmistakable scent. Taehyung’s lips part around a breath of wind that brushes atop Jungkook's knuckles. One by one, he adds several of his breaths into the gem of Jungkook's wedding ring: fire is first, then lightning that carries some of the rain in its path. The next breath is wind, withholding a piece of cloud in its midst. Lastly, he adds a fourth and last breath.

Taehyung straightens up when he's done. He and Jungkook look down.

A miniature, tempered storm can be seen within the diamond, the minuscule clouds and lightning coiling together. The drops of rain are just as small, tiny little specks that trickle down the sides of the gem.

Taehyung shushes his lightning and arcane as a whole, the sky calming down. The falling rain grows lighter by the second, however still present.

“God…”

Taehyung meets Jungkook's gaze.

“Your arcane is the most beautiful, Taehyung.”

Taehyung does not overthink it when he cups Jungkook’s cheek and nape to cross the distance and kiss him.

Taehyung’s lips naturally close around Jungkook’s upper one as his lids fall shut. Jungkook freezes for a split second before relaxing and kissing Taehyung back, their nose bumping together.

A roar of joyful congratulations erupts in the venue, applauds following soon after.

Taehyung counts to three before parting away from Jungkook. Discomfort creeps up his skin, gnarly enough that he wishes nothing more than to shrink into himself and be as far away from Jungkook as humanly possible. Jungkook, on the other hand, appears surprised yet content, a pink tinge coloring his glistening cheeks.

When Taehyung reflexively darts his tongue over his own lower lip, the hint of strawberry is there. It tastes… pleasant, a fact he'd rather bring to his tomb than share it with the mischievous Prince.

Dragons roar in the sky, some breathing out their fire while drawing circles over the venue. The orchestra’s slow, melodious song shifts to a merry one as the people begin to dance in the rain on their raised sittings or in the garden.

Taehyung and Jungkook both turn to face the guests in front of the altar who, for the most part, don’t appear to be thrilled about the drizzle. Taehyung nearly grins at the view but catches himself in time. Instead, he wraps an arm around his husband's waist.

His husband.

His husband who smiles and waves at everyone. *His husband* who wraps his fingers around Taehyung’s on his hip.

The Elder’s arcane that had amplified their voices is gone, and Jungkook must have noticed it because he says “Did it work?”

“Uh?” Taehyung can only say, dazed by the reality of *his husband's existence* .

Jungkook shuffles on his feet to face Taehyung. He places his hands on Taehyung’s chest, still smiling. Taehyung knows that it’s for the pretense they have to enact, but he barely manages to repress the impulsive reaction of jerking away when Jungkook’s face inches closer to his, thankfully not to kiss, but rather to speak, only for Taehyung to hear.

“The strawberry lip balm.”

Taehyung blinks confusedly. “What?”

“I knew you’d hate the kiss, but I thought it might be more bearable if it has a taste you like. Plus the look on your face when you realized where the flavor came from made it even more worth it.”

Taehyung can’t formulate a reply, both impressed and embarrassed that Jungkook would think of this. “Why would you—” His attention drifts on the still cheering people. He slaps a fabricated smile on his face before surveying Jungkook. “Why would you think of that?”

“Why not?”

Taehyung leans closer to Jungkook. His fingers sprawl on Jungkook’s lower back, pulling him closer. His next words are whispered against the Prince’s ear, ensuring no dragonborn can eavesdrop. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“And you’re married to him now,” Jungkook whispers back with a cheeky smile.

Taehyung reclines. “That retort won’t last for long if you keep using it.”

Jungkook hums, his eyes narrowing. “Threatening your husband’s life at the wedding? After barely being married for, what, five minutes? It’s distasteful, even for you.”

Taehyung begins to guide them away from the tree and near their families. "Shut up."

“Make me.”

“If you’re implying what I think you're implying, you’ve got one thing coming and I’d rather—”

“Swallow your tongue and die, yes, yes, I know the song,” Jungkook finishes.

“Damn brat,” Taehyung mutters.

“Prick,” Jungkook shoots back with a jut of his chin. He averts his gaze from Taehyung to glance at their right. “Now, let’s brace ourselves. We have a long night ahead of us."

Taehyung scrutinizes the spot Jungkook had been staring at.

Seungwon is there, striding away from the raised sitting and vanishing into the masses populating the garden.

Jungkook quickly falls back into his role as the tenseness in his muscles lessens while he hugs Namjoon. Taehyung embraces his mother, then Jimin and his father, however Taehyung cannot for the life of him shake off the restlessness that wavers within him.

It starts with his skin that pebbles. Then, the back of his neck prickles, as though a gaze is boring onto him, which is most definitely the case considering the thousands of people watching him, yet something bothers him.

He makes no mention of it, preferring to put this perhaps irrational feeling aside.

So Taehyung smiles as best he can in spite of how little he means it, and Jungkook finds his place by his side, tucked against him.

Chapter End Notes

I am SOOOO excited for the next chapter 😭 It'll be so much fun to write and I hope it'll be just as much to read!! Writing the ceremony was one hell of a challenge but I hope you enjoyed it and could picture what happens nicely 🤍 As I said next chapter will be the second part of the wedding (and hopefully the last, I refuse to have the wedding be three chapters long XD), so stay tuned for it, important things for the development of Taekook's relationship will happen 👀🤍

Now onto the visuals!! There are maaany of them for this chapter 🫶

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's Visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH9.

Taehyung's 1st outfit
Jungkook's 1st outfit
Taehyung's hair
Taehyung's hair 2
Jungkook's hair

The avenue and amphitheater
Ribbon spectacle
Lantern/lotus spectacle (pretend the lanterns/lotuses are black and that the fire is inside them)
Archers

Taehyung's 2nd outfit
Taehyung's headpiece
Jungkook's 2nd outfit
Jungkook's headpiece

The venue

Taehyung's gift (quill)
Taehyung's gift (book)(it doesn't have all the wheels)
Jungkook's gift
Taehyung's ring for Jungkook
Jungkook's ring for Taehyung

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook in his wedding suit by Mosy96

Liv made a HUGE project where she drew every single out fit Taehyung and Jungkook wore for the wedding with lil additions of chibi tae or koo T___T Please give it a lot of love 🤲🤍

❧ Day 1: Taehyung in his 1st outfit made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 2: Jungkook in his 1st outfit made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 3: Taehyung in his 2nd outfit + headpiece made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 4: Jungkook in his 2nd outfit + headpiece made by _yourosewei_

Chapter 10: The Wedding — Part II

Chapter Summary

The feast happens, and confrontations follow suit.

Chapter Notes

So... In the end the second part of the wedding got wayyy too long, and I decided to split it in two, meaning this chapter and the next one will close the wedding!! I hope you enjoy this one hehe 🤍

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the fuck is this?”

“Your third and last outfit of the night, why?” Dahee says.

“I was never made aware of a third outfit, and this… *thing*,” Taehyung grimaces, holding the offending piece of clothing away from him, “isn’t my style at all.”

“Can you *please* hurry and get changed already so we can eat?” Jimin groans. “I’m fucking starving.”

“Me too,” Namjoon sighs.

“Hey, what’s your friend’s favorite meal? I don’t mean Jungkook,” Jimin clarifies to Namjoon.

“Lamb skewers,” Namjoon answers. “It’s also one of Jungkook’s favorites.”

“*Jimin*,” Taehyung mutters in warning.

“Just inquiring about our dear new friends, nothing wrong with that,” Jimin deflects with a wave of his hand.

Taehyung’s attention reverts back to the outfit he’s supposed to be wearing for the rest of the night and ball. It’s white. Too white, a color — is it even one? — that he isn’t fond of. The worst part has to be the frills at the collar and sleeves, the dress shirt also too ample for his tastes.

“Hurry up, Son. I am famished as well,” Junhyun says.

“So am I,” Dahee nods. “Get dressed and stop whining, Taehyung.”

Taehyung wants to protest more but he's too outnumbered. He snatches the bottom piece of his garment to make his way toward the changing room. He had at least counted on the fact that he’d

be wearing clothes he likes that would have comforted Taehyung for the remainder of the festivities with the over 270 human guests awaiting him.

Someone taps Taehyung's arm.

It's Jungkook.

"Wait."

Taehyung twists around. Jungkook vanishes in a room before coming back, this time armed with garment bags.

"Here." Jungkook hands his burden to Taehyung who takes it with narrowed eyes. "I had a feeling you wouldn't like the clothes they got for you, so I bought another outfit just in case. I think it's more your taste?" He says, swaying on the ball of his feet and nervously fiddling with his wedding ring, an odd reaction from the usually confident prince.

Taehyung throws the shirt and pants away in favor of sliding open one of the garment bags. A suit, grey with a subtle checkered pattern on it, greets him. A black, silk shirt complements the rest of the outfit; short sleeved and with a loose v neck that will dip low over Taehyung's chest; along with a vest with dark lapels.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted any sort of jewelry, but I also stumbled on this while shopping for these," Jungkook resumes and opens the box that had been laying on a dresser. "I thought you might like it too. You attach it at the back, a bit like a harness?"

Some sort of golden ribcage jewelry lies in the box with dark straps at the back. Or is it more of a ribcage corset? Taehyung isn't so certain, but it's on brand with the bone-like necklace he wears, and more surprisingly, it brings the apparel as a whole together. The entire thing is admittedly stunning, falling right under the picky umbrella of Taehyung's tastes.

Jungkook fidgets with one of the ribcage's buckles, looking at anything but Taehyung. "I don't know if you like it. I saw it and I thought— I just bought it. Without thinking. And… Uhm. Yeah. With the skulls on our headpieces, I thought maybe you'd like this? I don't know what I thought, I — Forget about it, I'll—"

Taehyung lightly smacks Jungkook's hand away to grab the harness/corset/whatever the fuck it is. Taehyung only now really pays attention to Jungkook.

The Prince is dressed in a layered, black outfit, saved for the golden accents that compliment that elegance of the garment. Jungkook's back is naked for the most part, and the rows of thin chains of gems dangle along his spine when he turns to the side.

"I like it," Taehyung says, because to his pleasant surprise, he truly does appreciate the apparel. He supposes the admission can serve as a word of gratitude.

"I can't believe you managed to find clothes Taehyung likes," Dahee says, diverting Taehyung's gaze from the dragon necklace Jungkook has fastened around his neck. "He has always been impossibly difficult."

"I'm not difficult," Taehyung retorts as he enters the changing room.

“You are when it does not concern simple clothing, my son,” Junhyun counters.

Taehyung glares at his parents before yanking the curtain shut. He promptly gets dressed, and he's taken aback by how well the ribcage harness and suit fits him. After peering at the black and red scale falling from his neck, he steps out.

Jimin whistles. “The two of you will be turning heads tonight, especially you,” he adds with a wink at Jungkook who giggles.

“We should leave before the Queen sends an army to get us,” Yoongi worries, who has been quiet his own corner.

“Yes. Let's.” Jungkook makes a move to exit the area, however Taehyung grabs his arm.

“Wait.”

Everyone pauses and looks at Taehyung.

“Not you. I have to speak with the viper,” Taehyung clarifies. Yoongi’s wariness is as evident as a griffin inside a shop of glass, but Taehyung ignores it to tug Jungkook toward the far back of the room as the rest of the group leaves the place.

“What is it?”

Taehyung releases his hold. “What do you want to do about Seungwon?”

Jungkook deflates, shoulders sagging. He sighs. “I have no idea… Maybe he was only present at the ceremony since it’s been held outside? He shouldn’t be there at the feast or ball.”

“That’s wishful thinking.”

“Perhaps.”

“And if he’s there?” Taehyung presses. Seungwon has no care for rules or demands, even if coming from Amaris’ rulers.

Jungkook silently observes Taehyung for a moment. “You said you’d shun him.”

“Yes, and I mean it if that’s what you want. I hate him as much as you do. Plus seeing his face at the feast might have me barf my damn dinner,” Taehyung grumbles, already annoyed at the sole thought of the pig being there. Jungkook chuckles. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t know, Taehyung,” Jungkook sobers up, his words slow and weary.

Taehyung stares at him then proposes “We’ll see when we get there, and if he’s here to begin with.”

“Sounds good.”

Taehyung makes his way toward the exit door, Jungkook trailing at the back.

Taehyung’s family and Jungkook’s friends await them as they walk down the corridor.

“What’s wrong? Has he done something?” Yoongi asks with a frown.

“If I had, I'd be walking around with one less earlobe,” Taehyung jests.

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

“Deservedly so,” Yoongi snides, and all at once, Taehyung comprehends from whom the Prince has gotten his brashness.

“Yoongi, I’m fine,” Jungkook chastises with a pointed look. “I’m just a bit tired and a lot hungry, so let’s get downstairs.”

The group discusses while descending toward the garden where dinner will be held. At the head of the group with Taehyung, Jungkook slings an arm around Taehyung’s, the two of them soon greeted by the plethora of guests awaiting them.

Taehyung notices the difference from how the crowd had been during the spectacle and ceremony.

The ambiance here is more disciplined and uptight, an accurate reflection of the pompous, stuck up human guests populating the area. Thankfully, the few dragonborns present don’t shy away from loudly cheering and making a show of it, bringing some humor out of Taehyung when two dragonborns draw two kissing faces in the air.

Taehyung, his parents and Jimin, along with Jungkook and his friends, all join Seohyung and Sungmin at their dining table facing those of the guests.

The tables and chairs are all made of wood, with sparse decorations on them, the cushions beige and mingling well with the greenery. The area is unexpectedly warm in spite of being outside at night during winter. Taehyung suspects a warlock is the cause of this. Or perhaps some of the dragonborns with fire breaths that must be emanating a certain heat to keep themselves and those at their table warm.

Taehyung’s group settles down, the guests mirroring them. Jungkook is on Taehyung's right along with his parents, Namjoon and the annoying warlock; meanwhile Taehyung's family cascades down at Taehyung's left.

Taehyung settles his arcane on the fire aspect to spread the heat toward his family. In a feat of kindness, he extends it toward Jungkook as well. And only the Prince. Amaris’ rulers along with Jungkook’s friends can freeze to death for all Taehyung cares.

“Please,” Jungkook starts, standing and raising his glass, “enjoy the meal our wonderful chefs have prepared for us tonight, and thank you for joining us.”

The guests clap as Jungkook sits down.

Maids arrive, settling plates with the entrée.

Taehyung promptly digs in. Similar to how the food had been the first time Taehyung had eaten at Amaris, the fare is exquisite.

The dinner elapses rather peacefully aside from the scrutinizing eyes Taehyung can feel on him at every second that passes. It bothers him, however he can’t do much about it lest he antagonizes the guests. So Taehyung remains quiet, focusing on his meal and entirely forsaking the guests' existence.

Amidst the interlude between the entrée and dinner, some of the guests walk up to Taehyung and Jungkook's table to congratulate them about their marriage. The discussions are thankfully sparse and brief. Taehyung doesn't speak much to save what's left of his energy for later mingling.

Jungkook is fairly quiet as well, only occasionally talking with Taehyung or touching Taehyung's forearm here and there.

It's odd, but Taehyung doesn't care enough to ask.

Well…

He does not care until his gaze drifts on Jungkook.

Jungkook's left hand is on the table, his fingers sprawled over the napkin neatly folded on the wood. The index of his other hand traces the sharp angles of his wedding ring's diamond. The motion is slow and attentive. His dessert is untouched.

"I'm not getting you another one if you don't like it," Taehyung says then takes a sip of his water.

Jungkook jolts on his seat. He watches Taehyung and shakes his head. "I love it." He looks at the ring again. "I'm just… fascinated."

"By what?"

"Taehyung," Jungkook says through a chuckle. "You created a *storm.* And I don't know what is more spellbinding: the fact that your arcane is powerful enough to alter weather? Or the fact that you have knowledge on how to create a thunderstorm using nature and your breaths?"

Now.

Taehyung isn't the kind of man to blush and giggle or any of that nonsense, however he does feel a warm sense of pride swell in him at Jungkook's confession.

"S'not much," Taehyung shrugs with a faux air of nonchalance.

"I think it's pretty amazing," Jungkook rebuts. "Will the storm remain inside the ring?"

"It's trapped in the diamond and feeding itself in a constant cycle, so yes, it will, unless the diamond breaks. Or if I die."

"What?"

"If I die, my arcane will obviously be gone, and with it the storm will be too."

"Don't say that," Jungkook mutters through pursed lips.

"You asked." Taehyung pushes his plate away now that he's done inhaling his third serving.

"It's too dark of a conversation to have at a wedding."

"Alright, let's talk about something else then." Taehyung lifts his pendant by the chain and says "You don't have scales, so what is this made of?"

Jungkook visibly stills. His lips part then close a few times. “I… I mean—” He clears his throat and brings his cup to his mouth. “Dark theme.”

Taehyung squints at the Prince. He straightens up and leans closer to Jungkook who deftly averts his gaze. “What is the scale made of?”

“Does it matter?”

“It didn’t until you reacted like that. I need to know now.”

“That’s too bad.” Jungkook pushes Taehyung away.

“Damned viper. What is it made of?” Taehyung presses and he has half a mind to remove the pendant but he can’t. Not in front of the few dragonborns feasting with them.

“Ask me nicely and I’ll consider telling you,” Jungkook says with a jut of his chin. Taehyung reprimands the jest with a zap on Jungkook’s thigh. Jungkook startles and glares at him. "Stop doing that!"

“Doesn’t hurt.”

Jungkook tweaks the skin on Taehyung’s forearm. “Every time you zap me, I’ll pinch you.”

“Sure.” Taehyung zaps Jungkook and, as promised, it’s followed by a hard pinch.

“You’re such a child,” Jungkook laments and contorts when Taehyung aims another zap of his lightning on Jungkook’s side. “Stop it,” he exclaims through a laugh.

“No. Now tell me.”

“No.”

“Tell me.”

“I said no, you prick. If you were nice, I’d—”

Taehyung zaps Jungkook twice. “Tell. Me.”

And Jungkook responds with a double pinch. “N. O.”

“You fucking brat, tell me what—” Taehyung pauses when he hears some snickers coming from his left.

His head darts to peer at his smiling family, and when he looks ahead, he realizes that every single guest is staring at him and Jungkook. Some are holding back their laughter, hiding it behind a hand, while most of them are clearly taken aback and nonplussed at the bickering husbands.

Jungkook tenses next to Taehyung.

Taehyung's gaze falls on Jungkook’s lap: the Queen has placed a tight, bruising-looking hand on Jungkook's knee.

“Behave,” Seohyung hisses through a forged curl of her mouth.

Slipping into a particularly devious mood, Taehyung decides to interject. Not to defend Jungkook, but rather to revel in the ire that will inevitably take over Seohyung's face. “My husband can do and say whatever he wishes."

Seohyung’s somber gaze flies toward Taehyung. “He is embarrassing us.”

“He’s embarrassing *you*, not me or my family,” Taehyung corrects and slings an arm around the back of Jungkook’s chair. “Leave him be.”

“My Queen,” Jungkook says with an equally faux smile, voice low to not be heard by the prying guests. “Let go of me. Right now. Lest I make a scene.”

The Queen wordlessly relents her hold on Jungkook’s knee, not without one last admonishing glance.

“I’m still waiting,” Taehyung reminds Jungkook

Jungkook levels Taehyung with a deadpan look. Taehyung arches a brow and Jungkook sighs. “Half of it is one of Revna’s scales that I found on the floor and had been melted."

“And the other half?”

“Well,” Jungkook draws out. “It might be… my blood?”

Taehyung blankly stares at Jungkook.

He had fleetingly considered this, however he had discarded the theory that had sounded too unhinged for the Prince.

And yet...

Taehyung lifts the scale to his face and further examines it. Its scent does not retain any metallic tinge to it. “Have you gone mad?”

“In my defense, I was told that the pendant exchange is one of the most important traditions for dragonborns, and that a piece of me had to be given,” Jungkook explains. “I don’t have scales, and I wasn’t about to give you one of my nails. So.”

Adding blood isn’t unheard of, but it is quite rare as dragonborns simply choose to give one of their scales.

“Is that too much?”

“Me wearing your blood around my neck?”

“When you put it like that… “But Jimin told me it was fine, and that it was sometimes done.”

“Yeah, it can happen.”

“So you don’t mind. You’re just being a prick about it.”

Taehyung minds having a constant reminder that he’s forever tied to Jungkook, but said reminder being made of blood is an unimportant detail for him. “It would bother me even if the scale was

made from gold.”

Jungkook watches Taehyung for a moment before going back to his dessert. “I see.”

The remainder of the feast loses its serenity.

Jungkook doesn’t utter a word, and at first Taehyung assumes that it’s due to something he has said, however Taehyung promptly understands the cause of Jungkook’s growing irritation.

The rare times Jungkook dares speak, he’s shushed by Seohyung. When he makes a move to stand, Seohyung stops him with a gripping hand that Taehyung doesn't need to look at to imagine the nails boring into the skin. When Jungkook eventually gets enough of her commands and is visibly about to snap at her, Sungmin pins him with a warning glare, and so Jungkook subdues, reverting back to this doll-like, impassive demeanor.

Jungkook says naught.

Taehyung leans near him and whispers "Want me to tell her off? I can—"

"Don't." Jungkook's glacial gaze drifts on Taehyung for a moment before it skids away.

So Taehyung doesn't say anything else.

He and his family watch everything unfold, Dahee in particular who can’t hide her contempt.

Taehyung meets Jimin’s irked gaze at one point. Taehyung mouths a *‘Told you’* to him.

An hour and a half later, Jungkook stands.

“If you could please follow us inside the castle,” Jungkook requests and makes a motion toward it. Taehyung catches the reddish crescent in the palm. “Drinks and more appetizers await us for the remainder of the night.”

The guests rise to their feet, escorted by some servants to the confinement of the castle.

Although no other word has been spoken, those at Taehyung’s table linger behind in a muted, mutual agreement.

Once every guest has left the premises, the bubble bursts.

The Queen utters Jungkook's name, the enmity she holds for her own son oozing from that sole word.

Jungkook slowly turns around to face Seohyung, impassive. “Yes, my Queen?”

“Seohyung and I would like to speak with you,” Sungmin says.

“Regarding?”

Sungmin glances at Taehyung. “It is a private discussion. Follow us.” He swivels on his feet and starts to walk away, however neither the Queen or Jungkook budge. “Jungkook. *Now*. Do not make me repeat myself.”

“Jungkook, if this will be your behavior during this marriage, perhaps a revision of the terms must be done, starting by bringing you back to Amaris until we deem you disciplined enough to leave,” Seohyung warns.

Jungkook slowly exhales through his nose. He runs a hand through his sculpted hair, ruining the careful styling. He then chooses to ignore the Queen in order to turn toward Taehyung and step aside to make his way toward the castle. He does not get very far before Seohyung yanks him back by the wrist.

“Come with us before I have you sent to a room."

Leaning against the table, Taehyung muses about whether or not he should intervene. He decides not to for several reasons: 1) he doesn’t want to, 2) Jungkook forbade him to, 3) he doesn’t need to.

Jungkook wrenches his arm from Seohyung’s hold and stalks closer to the Queen who walks backward, her gaze darkening. “I am so, *so* fucking tired of your constant *bullshit*.”

Taehyung’s brows fly off his forehead to disappear somewhere in the sky. His mouth parts open as he catches a breathed out *‘Oh’* from Jimin. Yoongi and Namjoon looked stunned as well, gawking at Jungkook.

“I’m done. I’m *done.* Do you understand? I'm done with your *'Jungkook this’*, *‘Jungkook that’,* of hating my own name because of you. You don’t get to dictate my life anymore, and you never will again,” Jungkook rasps through a laugh, one of those barbed with callousness. “You can spew all the threats you want, you can even try to use my own husband or Seungwon to chain me down, however none of this will matter, Seohyung. It won't matter when I finally let go of any inhibitions I may have and tear asunder every single thing you stand for no matter how meager it is.”

“Do not speak to your Queen—”

“She is not my Queen,” Jungkook interrupts Sungming. “She is no Queen or mother, just like you are no King or father. You are nothing but measly pests.”

“Jungkook, if you do not cease this tantrum immediately…”

"Yes?"

Sungming only glowers at his son.

"Well why stop so soon? Let us hear what you have prepared for me," Jungkook dares. He even pauses for a moment, however Seohyung and Sungmin remain quiet, to Taehyung's amusement. "Nothing? Have you perhaps found reason at last?"

"You have forgotten your place," Seohyung seethes.

"Have I? Say, Seohyung, if I am to expose all you’ve done to me, how horribly you've treated our workers behind closed doors, who will Amaris’ people side with? You, the wretched Queen and King? Or me, the mistreated yet beloved heir?"

Cornered against the table by Jungkook, Seohyung shoves him away to straighten non-existent wrinkles in his dress. “They would never believe any lie spilling out of your vile mouth.”

“I see reason still escapes you,” Jungkook says with a forlorn sigh. Taehyung has to press his lips together to bite back his hilarity. "How naïve must you be to believe I haven't collected proof of your discipline."

A flash of surprise flickers over Seohyung's face, washed over by a frigid rancor. “Are you threatening us?”

“I don't know. Are *you* threatening me?"

“Moving to Vanae and living with dragonborns has made you lose sight of—” Sungmin pauses, as though remembering now the presence of Taehyung and his family.

“Nevertheless, today is my wedding. It is *my* day," Jungkook emphasizes. "I would like to keep it as a good memory instead of a nightmare induced by you both. Do *not* pester me with your presence unless *I* personally seek it. Is that clear?”

Seohyung is positively fuming, her form trembling with repressed anger. You…” She halts as Sungmin’s hand touches her back. She grips onto the sides of her dress, then she swivels around to stride away, Sungmin hot on her trail.

Dahee, hidden behind Junhyun’s large stature, has a hand pressed against her mouth, her shoulders shaking. Jimin isn't faring any better, lips pursed to conceal his smile.

Taehyung's own hilarity lessens when he catches the tremors in Jungkook's hand, or the fear that swims in his eyes when he shakily exhales. “I can’t believe you fucking swore,” he says, an attempt to break the terseness.

Jungkook’s gaze darts on Taehyung. He chuckles, even if weakly. “You’re a terrible influence.”

“Jungkook, what the hell,” Yoongi curtly says.

“I’m tired of her and Sungmin,” Jungkook sluggishly shrugs.

“And you’re sure it’s wise to oppose her this way?” Yoongi counters.

“I think it’s wonderful," Taehyung interjects and pushes himself off the table to stand near Jungkook. "He should do it more often."

“You don’t seem to understand that infuriating the Queen never bodes to anything good," Yoongi says.

“And what would happen? She’d lock me in a room? Been there, done that. She’d threaten to break off the engagement with Taehyung? Been there, done that. She’d mention Seungwon to frighten me? Been there, done that, several times. I can’t— I can’t do this anymore, Yoongi. I haven’t experienced this much happiness and peace since I left Amaris. My chest doesn't feel heavy anymore. I can finally *breathe*. I'm free. For the first time in my life, I’m *free*.” The last word breaks at the end, a turmoil of emotion flashing across Jungkook’s face. “And I refuse to lose any of this because I'm scared of the worst when it's already happened to me."

“If anything is to occur,” Junhyun chips in, “you have us as allies, Jungkook. We are loyal to you and your people, not to the Queen and King.”

“It's just… They *really* don't like how brash you’ve been since you left,” Yoongi continues.

“And?” Jungkook says.

Yoongi breaks from the stern tone he had been adopting to smile. “And it’s hilarious. Just be careful, kid,” he says and pats Jungkook’s head. "I'm worried."

“I’m 24,” Jungkook mumbles and bats Yoongi’s hand away.

“Still a kid to me.”

“Sorry to break whatever is going on. Yoongi: I nearly smacked you. Jungkook: I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself no matter how risky it is,” Namjoon fires in one breath. “Everyone: can we *please* head inside? I’m freezing my ass off.”

Taehyung nods. Even he is growing cold in spite of his arcane. “My nipples are about to fall off."

“That’s what you get for showing off your pecs in the middle of winter, stupid idiot,” Jimin jests.

“Fuck off. I’m blaming the Prince. He's the one who chose this.”

“The Prince is more than happy to take the blame,” Jungkook says and holds onto Taehyung’s arm. “You are indeed turning heads, mine included.”

Taehyung peers at Jungkook. “What does that even mean?”

Jungkook responds with a stony stare. “‘Stupid idiot’ is an euphemism,” he eventually says to Jimin.

“Yup.” Jimin pops out the ‘p’.

Everyone chats together as the group enters the castle, the entrance door shut close behind them.

Jungkook guides them through a series of corridors, and a few minutes later, they arrive at the vast ballroom that is as ostentatious as the rest of the building. Chandeliers dangle from the ceiling while candelabras dot the place, illuminating it along with two large fireplaces that warm up the area.

Windows line up the walls, displaying the night sky, and Taehyung is somewhat reassured by the openness of the ballroom. His restlessness simmers beneath his skin at the 300 guests scattered across the marble floor, but he finds some comfort in the — delicious looking — finger food littering the tables.

Taehyung heaves a deep, long sigh. “Let the nightmare begin.”

Dahee softly slaps Taehyung’s shoulder. “Son.”

“I said what I said.”

“I think this night can be fun,” Jungkook chirps. “Especially if we—”

All of a sudden, Jungkook freezes, and his enthusiasm wanes quicker than a thawing block of ice thrown in a blazing bonfire.

Taehyung is confused, to say the least, even more when Jungkook's fingers tighten where they're curled around Taehyung's bicep.

Jungkook is looking at a spot behind Taehyung.

Taehyung's head twists around.

"This…"

"What's ha—"

"Seungwon's here," Taehyung interrupts Yoongi.

Yoongi turns on his feet as well. He looks pissed off, Namjoon as well, and quite frankly, everyone in their group does, including Taehyung's parents. Jimin is the only one who isn't showing any emotion aside from pure indifference.

"I'll talk to the Queen," Namjoon snips. "This bastard isn't allowed here. I told her to not let him get in no matter what but—"

"Rats always find their way, don't they?" Jungkook sneers.

The faint music floating in the room does nothing to alleviate the tension that has fallen over their group.

Seohyung and Sungmin are conversing with some guests on the other side of the room. Taehyung can't tell if they're aware of the dragonborn's presence or not.

"I should have known better," Jungkook says. "She's doing this to discipline me. I wouldn't be surprised if she wouldn't have let him in initially, but changed her mind after what I said to her earlier."

"He would have showed up either way," Jimin states, facing away from Seungwon. "He has a knack for being in places he's not invited to."

Dahee hums. "Perhaps we should—"

Before Dahee can finish her sentence, they're swarmed by the guests who can now freely discuss — and bother — the newly married couple.

Jungkook wears his carefully crafted mask of cordiality as he takes the onslaught of congratulations and questions with a stride. Taehyung doesn't listen much to the mundane chats that erupt around him, although he does pipe in here and there for good measure.

His mind is preoccupied.

The prickling he has felt a couple times throughout the ceremony is back once more, the sensation of being watched unnerving. However when he scouts his surroundings, he can't see anything that would explain his abrupt discomfort. Perhaps being surrounded by humans is hitting him more than he had realized at first.

The after-party unfolds in this same manner: with Taehyung and Jungkook reluctantly mingling with guests.

Taehyung musters some smiles at first. He does his best to appear approachable with Vanae's sake in mind, but the more the night goes on, the more useless his efforts feel in this environment.

The human guests keep glancing at him, more specifically at the other invited dragonborns. The humans murmur Elders know what to each other, some not even attempting to hide their blatant disdain.

Everything feels more stuffy and fabricated here, as if this night exists only to serve as a ploy to form new connections, if deemed beneficial. It reads like a test as well: of Taehyung, his family and people. The amount of inquiries thrown in Taehyung's face is endless, more arguable and audacious than the other.

Taehyung won't say it to the Prince, but he's thankful for how Jungkook diverts the attention away from Taehyung.

Jungkook doesn't shy away from complimenting Vanae and its people, or dragonborns in general. He speaks about his life in this new land, how wonderful it is, how much he's been learning there. It helps with some of the guests' wariness, but not all.

Jungkook evidently strives in those kinds of social and political matters where pretending is at the core of everything. It has Taehyung thinking back on what his mother had said what feels like months ago, about how Taehyung and Jungkook would complement each other well. Taehyung doesn't think it holds much truth at all, but he has to concede that Jungkook does balance Taehyung's aloofness and social awkwardness quite well.

An hour passes that Taehyung spends maintaining a careful eye on Seungwon.

Jungkook grows more and more tense next to Taehyung, his form strained and smiles losing their curl. So when the two of them finish their glass, Taehyung uses this to excuse them from the group they have been hooked by, and leads Jungkook toward a more secluded table for a moment of peace.

Jungkook releases his hold on Taehyung to fill his glass with some non-alcoholic punch. "I know you don't care and that it's for pretense," Jungkook starts, preceding Taehyung.

Taehyung waits for Jungkook to continue as he fills up his own glass with a strawberry cocktail. "What?" He presses when Jungkook never finishes. "Speak your mind."

"Can I stay close to you tonight?"

Taehyung glances at Jungkook, then at Seungwon.

Seungwon has not left Jungkook's form once.

Taehyung internally snarls. He could force Seungwon to leave, maybe provoke him into a challenge, but he won't go that far yet when neither his family or Jungkook have requested it. "Yeah," Taehyung opts to say. It's not like the two of them are expected to be apart on their wedding day anyway.

"Thank you," Jungkook exhales. He shuffles closer to hang onto Taehyung's arm again. "Is this okay?"

“Do you have to be so damn close?” Taehyung grumbles when Jungkook’s chest presses flush against the back of his arm, their hips bumping together.

“Does it bother you?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Neither does it answer mine."

“I asked first and before your mouth me off, answer me.”

“I don’t *have* to be close,” Jungkook says and does the exact opposite by moving closer to Taehyung if possible, “but it is nice.”

“How is that nice,” Taehyung says and walks them to a table where some finger food is laid atop.

“It’s nice because I’m feeling safe right now.” Jungkook rests his glass to munch on an appetizer. “And I don’t mind being near you, unlike you, but I’m selfish enough to temporarily discard your discomfort that may not even be there to begin with anyway.”

“I *am* uncomfortable.” *Kind of*, Taehyung thinks to himself. He’d be happier away from everyone at present, but being near the Prince who is a familiar face isn’t too bad.

“You seem pretty relaxed though,” Jungkook teases.

“I’m a good actor.”

“No you’re not.”

Yeah, Taehyung isn’t.

“Are you really okay with me being this close?” Jungkook quietly asks. “I was joking earlier. I’ll step away if it bothers you.”

Taehyung mulls over his answer. “S’fine."

“Okay. Thank you.” Jungkook's fingers drift up and down Taehyung’s bicep over the gray vest. They squeeze every now and then on their path.

One of Taehyung’s eyes twitches.

It's when Jungkook’s fingertips probe some more that Taehyung leans near him to mutter “I said I’m fine with the closeness, not with being fondled, Viper.”

“I’m not fondling,” Jungkook denies yet does not stop his ministrations. “I’m… assessing.”

“Assessing what? The circumference of my bicep?”

“Your strength.”

“You’ve seen me split apart a tree trunk with my bare hands. What is there to ‘assess’?”

“That is for me to know, and you to wonder. But good luck with that since you can be so fascinatingly dense sometimes. Truly a feat.”

“Fuck you.”

Jungkook laughs, full of mischief. His improved mood doesn’t last for long, however. “He’s still staring at me. I don’t even have to check to know he is. 'can feel it.”

When Taehyung looks around, his gaze collides with Seungwon’s for a fleeting moment before the dragonborn looks away. “He’s not anymore.”

Jungkook exhales through his nose, jaw held tight. “I hate him, Taehyung.”

“I know. Let go of me.”

Jungkook immediately does. “Sor—”

Before Jungkook can finish his apology, Taehyung curls an arm around Jungkook’s waist to pull him in front of him. Jungkook does not say anything at the light manhandling aside from looking at Taehyung and uttering a small *‘Oh’* when he ends up standing with the table behind him and Taehyung at the front.

The Prince is effectively concealed from Seungwon’s scrutiny now, and Taehyung can’t help but gloat at the irked frown that etches the pig’s forehead.

“Doubt he can see much of you anymore,” Taehyung snickers then sips on his beverage. “He’d have to get closer to do so, and if he does, I’ll happily tell him off.” He can already taste the satisfaction he'd feel if he were to snatch Seungwon by the collar and put him through a wall. “Although—”

Jungkook is staring at Taehyung, which isn't all that strange. He's sporting a look similar to the one he had on when he had opened his wedding gift, however here, it's softened with *something* Taehyung can't decipher.

“Thank you,” Jungkook murmurs. The smile he draws may be small, but it is impossibly pleased, even when hidden by the hand he raises in front of his mouth.

Taehyung doesn’t know what to answer to this or Jungkook’s odd reaction, so he completely ignores both. “If I have to leave or am occupied entertaining the masses, you can go to my parents or Jimin. And if Seungwon bothers you when you’re alone, tell me,” Taehyung instructs but Jungkook chuckles. “What’s so funny?”

“In spite of the dislike you nurture for me, you’ve shown more protection and care toward me than my own parents. Is it not pathetic?”

“Rather than pathetic it should be infuriating."

“Oh, it is. It does not take away from the fact that it’s pathetic as well.”

“Then do something about it instead of wallowing in it."

“Yes, perhaps I should,” Jungkook says without an ounce of hurt.

Taehyung reminisces about the Prince’s outburst after the feast. “Kinda have earlier.”

“And look at the price I’m paying for it,” Jungkook derides, peering above Taehyung’s shoulder. “I’m afraid it’s about to become worse. You were right when you said Seungwon doesn’t like to not be given what he desires.”

“Huh?”

“What a pleasure.”

Taehyung’s nose twitches at the putrid waft that flies his way. He rests his glass on the table to avoid crushing it between his grip. He turns around, greeted by a smiling pig.

“Congratulations on the wedding, Jungkook,” Seungwon crookedly grins. “Hopefully this engagement lasts.”

Jungkook dismisses the words, not even bothering to appear friendly. “I thought we made it clear to the Queen to retract your invitation."

“The ceremony is over, is it not? This is more of a ball.” Seungwon rakes his eyes across the room before settling them on Jungkook. He does a once over of Jungkook. A corner of his mouth tugs upward. "Aren't you beautiful tonight, Doll."

“You were still there during the ceremony despite being forbidden to," Jungkook continues. "The Queen must have warned you about—”

“She may have fallen for his childish bluff, but I didn’t. This vermin wouldn’t challenge me,” Seungwon laughs, loud and commanding the attention of onlookers. “It’d put too much at stake, ain’t it? Cowards don’t risk that much.”

“Funny how the man who always chooses to hurt those weaker than him speaks about cowardice.” Taehyung's arcane swirls in his chest, lightning dancing between his fingertips.

Woobin makes his arrival at that moment and halts next to his father. His usual cockiness is gone, replaced by wariness.

Taehyung catches the looks his family pin Seungwon with from afar, and when Jimin mouths a *‘Need help?’* , Taehyung shakes his head.

“You admit being weaker than me?” Seungwon taunts, a reference to a scene of the past Taehyung wishes he could erase from his mind. “So much anger when I simply wanted to congratulate you both. With this, ah, union, we’re bound to meet at the Council. Sounds exciting, doesn’t it?”

Taehyung steps forward, partially wedging himself between Jungkook and Seungwon. “I don’t have the patience to deal with any of your fucking bullshit tonight. Leave.”

Seungwon’s merriness dissipates. People whisper around them and this is all it takes for Seungwon’s infamous fury to make its appearance as the color of his eyes reddens to a deep orange. “Careful how you address *me*, vermin.”

“If someone should be careful here, it’s certainly not me.”

“Careful of him too,” Seungwon sneers, raising his overly jeweled hand to wave it in Jungkook’s direction. “This one bites.”

Taehyung glances at Seungwon's absent earlobe. "Does he?" He asks with a smile, his arm slotting around Jungkook's waist. "He hasn't with me so far. At least nothing I didn't ask for."

"You'll see," Seungwon scorns. "He wasn't well disciplined back when he was promised to be mine. You should consider yourself lucky that he is now."

"Or perhaps the idea of being your betrothed repulsed him so much he had to find an outlet for it," Taehyung shoots back. He says nothing when Jungkook buries his face against his arm, his attempt at hiding his hilarity nullified by his shaking shoulders.

Seungwon glowers. "Watch your mouth."

"And watch your hands. I've come to know they wander, and I don't take kindly to pigs making my husband uncomfortable," Taehyung says, loud enough to be heard by the gossiping guests.

"Father, there is someone who would like to speak with you," Woobin interjects.

Seungwon's gaze darts on his son then on the eavesdropping guests. Without granting another look at Taehyung or Jungkook, Seungwon marches off, snapping questions at Woobin who scurries to answer.

Taehyung distractedly listens to the rush of murmur that runs through the room, some of them about how surprised they are of Seungwon's behavior. Others, however, converse about the marriage, and it's those that get Taehyung's attention.

From the gist of what Taehyung has been getting for the past hour, a few of the guests appear to not have fallen for the pretense Taehyung and Jungkook have been putting — pretense that he admits to have been barely existent —, which could have some unfavorable outcomes for dragonborns.

Perhaps he could act more touchy with Jungkook, Taehyung ponders with distaste, but… *By the Elders*. What he and Jungkook decide to show off of their relationship should not have any importance for those noisy, blabbering busybody. It shouldn't fucking matter but here he is, pretending, mulling over how to steer through a relationship that—

"Oh my God," Jungkook laughs, tearing Taehyung away from his escalating thoughts. "His face. He's so *mad*."

Seungwon *does* look pissed off, which is quite the understatement for the glower that darkens his face.

"Good," is all that Taehyung says.

"It's reassuring to see the hatred you nurse for him." Jungkook may have heard the ambient gossiping because he shuffles to face Taehyung and spreads a hand over Taehyung's chest, pressing close to him. "The rest of your family seems to despise him just as much," he notes, ever observant. "How come?"

"None of your concern."

"You're boring," Jungkook says with an eye roll and Taehyung hums, his palm sliding down to Jungkook's lower back. "Now kiss me. People are talking."

Taehyung retrieves the glass from Jungkook’s hand to place it on the table. His fingers curl around Jungkook’s jaw to tilt his head to the side and he lowers his own, murmuring into Jungkook’s ear as to not be heard by anyone other than the Prince. “Pretend I’m whispering filthy shit to you,” he instructs and cups Jungkook’s waist. “I need a break, and you clearly do too. We’ll leave through the corridor on the right and come back later. It’ll give those babbling mouths something to talk about, yeah?”

Taehyung feels Jungkook's nod. When he reclines to survey the Prince, a rosy tint dusts Jungkook’s cheeks, his eyes faintly widened. Taehyung doesn’t know if it’s possible to fake a blush — maybe Jungkook discreetly pinched his cheeks red —, but he’ll take it as part of the pretense.

The hand that cups Jungkook's jaw drifts down to the throat, pausing there for a fleeting moment, before Taehyung's palm finds its place on Jungkook's nape. It's only then that Taehyung speaks, loud enough to be heard.

“Let’s get out of here for a minute, hm?”

Jungkook blinks, and he’s admittedly damn good at acting because his blush deepens. “I— Uh, yeah. Yes. Where…”

“Lead the way,” Taehyung says with a nod toward the corridor situated on the right side of the imperial stairs.

“Jeon Jungkook! What a—”

“Later.” Taehyung discards the man with a cold stare then focuses back on Jungkook. “Come on.”

Jungkook swivels on his feet as he begins to walk away. Taehyung closely trails after him, his fingers crawling up Jungkook’s scalp to card through the strands of hair.

They're strangely silky.

Taehyung had expected them to be crunchy from whatever product the Prince has used to style them, yet they aren’t, softly flowing through his fingers.

This is…

This is quite nice, Taehyung thinks as he rubs a lock between his thumb and index finger. He's reminded of that one silky smooth shirt he had stolen from Jimin. Taehyung touches his own hair. They aren't quite as soft as Jungkook's.

"Taehyung, Jungkook, may I borrow your att—"

"*Later*," Taehyung hisses.

Right before they vanish inside the corridor, and after a quick glance to ensure those in their vicinity are scrutinizing their every move, Taehyung uses his hold on Jungkook to turn him around.

Then, without allowing himself to question it, Taehyung kisses Jungkook.

His and Jungkook’s breath mingle together when he slots his lips around one of Jungkook’s right as the two of them disappear inside the corridor.

Jungkook’s hands fly to Taehyung’s shoulders from where he's forced to walk by Taehyung who pushes them further into the corridor. Jungkook’s equilibrium wavers, most likely tripping over his own feet like a damn hatchling. He yelps, breaking the kiss at the same time.

“Can’t you walk?” Taehyung chides as he readjusts the Prince's balance.

“You took me by surprise!"

Taehyung releases Jungkook then steps away from him. He wipes his mouth against the back of his hand and childishly makes a gagging noise that Jungkook chastises with a swat on Taehyung’s arm.

“You’re such an immature prick,” Jungkook mumbles, striding down the hallway.

The tip of his ears and back of his neck are pink, Taehyung notes. "Why are you blushing?"

Jungkook's hands fly up to smack atop his ears. "Quiet."

Taehyung follows Jungkook.

They enter a room adjoined with a balcony.

He and Jungkook blow out a puff of air in unison, Jungkook’s more petulant as he slumps down on the bed, his arms covering his face.

“By the Elders,” Taehyung groans and walks toward the balcony to slide open the glass door. The air is fresh and dewy, appeasing his mood. “I fucking hate this night.”

“There’s the dance, some quick mingling to bid goodbye to the guests, and then it’ll be over,” Jungkook mumbles in the crook of his elbow.

“I don’t know how much more mingling I can handle, Viper." It’s been over two hours since the after-party has started, and his patience is running thinner by the minute. “The pretense isn’t even working.”

“It definitely did after what we’ve just done. I can already hear them speculate about what we’re doing right now.”

“I should’ve brought Seungwon here to repeatedly smash his head against the wall and have the guests think the banging sound is something else entirely."

Jungkook bursts into laughter. His dress shoes click on the wooden floor before he crouches next to where Taehyung has plopped down on the floor. “Can you imagine their surprise? Instead of seeing us fool around, they’d be greeted by Seungwon’s ghastly sight.”

“Sounds like a dream to me.”

“I have to visit the bathroom,” Jungkook blurts out.

Taehyung thinks about making some crude jibe, but something in Jungkook’s tone refrains him from doing so.

“I'll be right back." Jungkook walks away before Taehyung can ask if he wants to be escorted to the restroom.

And so Taehyung does not as he watches Jungkook exit the bedroom.

Taehyung's fingers drum on his knee as he waits for the Prince.

A few minutes pass.

More time elapses without Jungkook coming back, and a voice nags at the back of Taehyung's head, becoming louder the more the stuffing silence drags on.

Something's wrong.

Taehyung springs to his feet and leaves the room. He descends toward the corridor he and Jungkook had taken. He discreetly peeps inside the ballroom. His family and Jungkook’s friends are chatting together.

Seungwon is absent.

Taehyung clicks his tongue and retraces his steps.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter may not be posted yet when stories reveals happen, and if it isn't it will be posted later tonight or tomorrow!! It's already written and I only have proofreading left to do 🤍

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH10.

Taehyung's third outfit
Jungkook's third outfit

The feast
The ballroom

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

Continuation of Liv's project!!

❧ Day 5: Taehyung in his 3rd outfit made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 6: Jungkook in his 3rd outfit made by _yourosewei_

❧ Compilation of the 6 days made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 7: Taekook's wedding kiss made by _yourosewei_

Chapter 11: The Wedding — Part III

Chapter Summary

Jungkook still hasn't come back from his visit to the bathroom, meanwhile the past creeps back in Taehyung's life. *Another* confrontation ensues, and this time, Taehyung is the recipient of Jungkook's anger.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is extremely long I'm sorry in advance XDD but it is also very very important for Taekook's relationship so enjoooy 🤍 I also have a song rec (kind of??), it's what I listened to while writing the last part of this chapter, you can put it on starting at *"Pain is relative, everyone experiences it differently."*

Tender Touch (Piano and Cello)

Cw:

1) Slur. Seungwon refers to Jungkook as a 'whore' in two instances, following the paragraphs starting with:
"Taehyung? Jungkook?" A woman's voice says…"
"Seungwon knows better. He may be more experienced…"
2) Brief mentions of abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The castle is so stupidly huge that Taehyung has no damn clue of which bathrooms Jungkook has gone to. He maps out the second floor, fruitlessly opening door after door. He decides to check the third floor where more empty bedrooms, bathrooms, dressing rooms and whatnot await him.

"This viper…" Taehyung curses as he passes through an umpteenth hallway and makes his way to the left side of the third floor.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jungkook's voice erupts from a narrow corridor.

Taehyung pauses.

"You and your vermin seem to want to play with me, trying to humiliate *me*," Seungwon seethes. "I'll have you kneel in front of me again. Taehyung hasn't taught you your place."

"Dear God... You're worse than a whining toddler."

Jungkook is probably rolling his eyes, Taehyung thinks.

Taehyung listens in on the argument and leans to the side.

Jungkook is reclined against the wall, Seungwon facing him less than a foot away. What ticks off Taehyung is the hand Seungwon has around Jungkook's throat, his other hand fastened on Jungkook's hip.

"All I need is a word with your parents and they'll cancel that worthless deal with the vermin. You could ally with me, Doll," Seungwon croons, and all at once Taehyung understands why Jungkook dislikes this 'pet name' so much. "I'd give you anything you want. You know that. I've shown you."

Taehyung could intervene. He should, really, and so he makes his presence known, hands tucked in his trousers' pockets as he leans a shoulder against the wall. "You really don't seem to learn, Seungwon."

Both Jungkook and Seungwon's head snap in Taehyung's direction. Taehyung only now notices the drop of blood dripping down Jungkook's nose.

"And you don't seem to teach that doll well enough. I can take care of it." Seungwon glowers at Jungkook. "Get on your knees."

Jungkook does not budge, as Taehyung anticipates. What he naively doesn't see coming is the punch Seungwon delivers in Jungkook's stomach who folds in half with a hiss. Seungwon seizes Jungkook by his hair and yanks his head back against the wall.

"You used to obey me so nicely."

Taehyung doesn't do anything.

Firstly because he expects Jungkook to retaliate as he assumes he already has. Secondly because when Jungkook still does not move, Taehyung *then* expects the basilisk to lurch out and bite at Seungwon's face, hopefully to a certain death Taehyung will happily help Jungkook conceal if needed.

Neither option happens, to Taehyung's confusion.

"Even your own husband doesn't stop me, what does it say about how important you are to people?" Seungwon taunts. "I've told you many times that you'd regret running away."

Jungkook laughs. "You're a deranged man-child with a tendency to be pathetically neurotic. I fear for your offspring if someone ever has the will to wed and bed with someone like you."

Seungwon doesn't like Jungkook's impudence, evidently. It's shown in the way his mouth twists around a callous smile; in his left hand that tightens around Jungkook's throat; and in his right hand that lowers on his hip and under his vest, where he withdraws a dagger from.

Taehyung moves, swift and agile.

Dragonborns' bodies are quite sturdy and robust, meaning that Taehyung does not have to restrain his strength as much as he would with a human.

A crack snaps through the stillness as he wrenches the dagger from Seungwon. Seungwon jerks away, holding his limp wrist against his chest.

Taehyung opens his mouth to speak, however before a single word comes out of it, he's grabbed by the collar of his shirt and harshly shoved against the wall, the dagger yanked from his grip in the same deft motion. The blade is cold where it's pressed against his neck, sinking into the flesh.

"You let him hit me," Jungkook rasps.

"I assumed your slithering friend would help you." The dagger's sharp blade nips at Taehyung's skin. A drip of blood trickles down his throat. "The viper can wield a blade. How unexpected."

"You watched him hit me and did *nothing*," Jungkook stresses. "I can defend myself, but I don't know if I'm allowed to. I've been living in your realm, surrounded by close bonded dragonborns. If I strike back, I could start a war without wanting to."

Right.

Perhaps Taehyung has been the foolish one for once.

"Taehyung? Jungkook?"

Taehyung peers at his mother. She's walking down the corridor, accompanied by Jimin and Junhyun.

"We've been looking for you…" Dahee trails off. She visibly assesses the situation, her eyes darting from Seungwon's broken wrist to her son being held at the tip of a dagger. "What has happened?"

"This whore hurt me. I'll have a word with the Queen and King."

Jungkook lets go of Taehyung to pivot. "You struck first while I haven't raised a single finger on you. I made sure not to."

"I have a broken wrist. I wonder whose words your parents will believe," Seungwon says with a crooked smile. "'*Jungkook came onto me despite being married. I did what had to be done'*, is what I could tell. They'd understand. *Everyone* would."

Jimin steps forward. "Disgusting fucker. I'll kill you before you—"

"Look at him! He's violent against his own betrothed," Seungwon chortles. "Drawing a knife to his throat! Imagine what Vanae's people would say if they heard about this. They wouldn't want this waste of a wedding anymore."

Taehyung's head lightly thumps as it falls against the wall. His mouth parts open, and his words are guttural and raspy as his tongue curls around the ancient, forgotten language of dragons. However a few draconic idioms have persisted throughout the millennia, some known well enough to be understood by most dragonborns.

Everyone except Jungkook freezes on their spot. Their gazes snap on Taehyung.

"Taehyung," Junhyun starts, cautious, "are you certain?"

Taehyung pushes himself off the wall. He grabs a hold of Jungkook's chin to which Jungkook responds by gripping Taehyung's wrist, his scowl everlasting. Taehyung discards it in favor of wiping his thumb at the corner of Jungkook's mouth where a cut is carved. "*'Blood for blood'* is the translation of what I said," he explains to Jungkook. "It's a saying uttered before a fight, usually to death."

Jungkook's eyes widen. "A challenge."

"Precisely." Taehyung retracts his hand. He wipes his thumb on Jungkook's vest who bats his hand away. "You drew my husband's blood, harassed him, threatened him, insulted him and so on. We can settle this in two different ways."

Seungwon's scent turns more and more acrid by the second. Taehyung revels in it with unabashed satisfaction.

"One: a challenge where death or surrender is the only outcome. Two: your withdrawal from the Council."

"I am a rightful member of the Council," Seungwon snaps. "It's my words against his. Against *yours.* You think dragonborns will believe you both over me?"

"How about a third option?" Jungkook interjects on Taehyung's right.

Taehyung doesn't want that third option. He doesn't even care about the second either. All that matters is the first that can finally happen now that Jungkook has unknowingly given Taehyung a reason to challenge Seungwon. "Why a third when the first two suffice?"

"I'm the one whose blood has been spilled. *I* get to choose. Not you." Jungkook's timber is steeled with a glacial resolution Taehyung wisely does *not* tamper with.

Not that Taehyung is scared of Jungkook.

The human — warlock, he reminds himself — doesn't represent any real danger in the technicalities of a necromancer versus chaos dragon, yet there is something in Taehyung's survival instincts that ignites alive and tentatively asks him to let it go this one time.

"Get on your knees and apologize," Jungkook says. "I have no care for trivial fights, and as you've said, I don't retain any influence in your draconic council. So, kneel before me, and I'll forget what happened today."

" *Kneel?* In front of you?" Seungwon spits a dribble of saliva at Jungkook's feet. "I'll have you wipe that spit before I ever kneel."

"We can sort this through blood instead, if you prefer," Taehyung offers.

Seungwon knows better. He may be more experienced than Taehyung, but Taehyung makes up for it with the high potency of his multiple breaths.

"You fucking whor—"

"Call him that one more time and you won't have a choice at all."

Seungwon barks out a laugh at Taehyung. “You already care about him? Thought you hated humans, huh?”

“Him and I are married. Any disrespect aimed at Jungkook is by extension directed at me. *That* is something I care about.” It makes sense in Taehyung's head. After all, he wouldn't care about defending Jungkook, right?

Seungwon may be a buffoon, but he is not a naïve one unaware of his limited options, if his darting gaze is any hint.

“You will regret this,” Seungwon warns, then growls something in draconian. “Each one of you.”

“Kneel,” is all that Jungkook says.

Seungwon’s face is as red as his furious eyes are. He bends a leg, then the second, and soon, he kneels before Jungkook, his gaze aimed ahead of him.

Jungkook looks down at Seungwon in every meaning of the word. His smile and half lidded eyes are brimming with a dark satisfaction, echoed in the hum he emits. The sound is chewed low and suave, sounding more like a cruel purr.

Anyone with a sliver of self-preservation would cower far from Amaris' heir in such circumstances. Yet all Taehyung can do is stare, take in the sight Jungkook makes, the danger the Prince can oppose.

Taehyung is positively *fascinated.*

Seungwon rises to his feet seconds later, tearing Taehyung out of his daze. “This isn’t the end of this”

“Perhaps I should have kissed you as you were once begging for,” Jungkook muses. “I could have ripped off your tongue then.”

Seungwon somehow manages to repress the urge to punch Jungkook, his balled up fist lowering. He doesn’t speak a word when he spins and shoulders past Jimin with a warning snarl. He turns at a corner and leaves, his steps echoing in the quiet lull.

“He won’t like that at all,” Jimin says.

Taehyung scoffs. “Tough shit. He’ll get over it.” He glances at Jungkook who raises the ruby to press it against his mouth, murmuring soothing words to the basilisk in it. “Are you—”

“Why didn’t you intervene?” Jungkook cuts off.

“Does it matter now? It’s done.”

“It matters because you watched him hit. You stood there. I expected better from you, but I suppose I had my hopes up too much.”

“You *what?*” Jimin exclaims.

“Kim Taehyung.” Dahee slaps the back of Taehyung’s head. “You may not be fond of Jungkook, however displaying such behavior is as heartless as Seungwon or the humans you abhor.”

“Blood for blood,” Taehyung dismisses. “It was the perfect occasion to force a challenge, and I didn’t expect—”

“So you used him hitting me for your own gain?”

There it is.

The churning, uncomfortable plunge in Taehyung’s chest.

“I didn’t— Not purposefully. It was a happenstance," Taehyung settles on replying. “I also assumed you had struck back already, and that you or the basilisk would again. Plus I did intervene eventually, didn’t I?”

Dahee passes by Taehyung to cup Jungkook’s cheeks. “Are you alright, my dear?”

“Yes,” Jungkook says but his head shakes 'no' in a nearly imperceptible motion.

Taehyung makes a move to grab Jungkook’s arm but the latter pulls himself away from Taehyung and Dahee. “You should clean up."

“Oh so you care now? Will you also offer your O so valuable help?”

“I just— I’d like to talk to you. If you let me."

Jungkook stares at Taehyung for a moment, as though searching for something in Taehyung’s eyes. Taehyung can’t tell if Jungkook has found the answer, but he swivels around and strides away from the group.

“Jimin, do you have—”

Jimin thrusts a jar of foundation against Taehyung’s chest. Jimin isn’t fond of makeup, but he has never gotten rid of the habit of carrying some with him wherever he goes.

“Be fucking nice to him, Taehyung,” Jimin warns. “I mean it.”

Taehyung wordlessly trails after Jungkook.

He finds him in a bathroom that he locks the door of in case some guests try to enter.

The basilisk is out and laid on the counter, peering up at Jungkook while the latter is hunched over the sink, splashing the running water on his face. Taehyung searches in his vest’s pocket and plucks a small jar of antiseptic that he places on the counter along with the foundation.

“What’s this?”

“The same antiseptic pomade I gave you when you first arrived at Vanae. The other is some foundation Jimin uses.”

Jungkook frowns but retrieves the jars. “Why do you have that on you?”

“I work on the field and tend to get hurt. I always carry some with me just in case,” Taehyung answers and leans back against the sink’s counter.

Jungkook produces a tissue from his pocket that he wets and uses to wipe the blood off his mouth and nose. “Or maybe you don’t pay enough attention and keep hurting yourself when it should not happen.”

“Whatever, Viper.”

Jungkook’s scowl does not dissipate as he continues to clean his wounds, dabbing the antiseptic pomade on his lower lip. “Say, was it just for show as it always is with you?”

“About?”

“The challenge. Would it have happened? Or was that another acting class from the great Kim Taehyung?”

“Of course it would have.”

Jungkook pauses in his movement to scrutinize him.

“Those challenges aren’t taken lightly, as I once told you.”

“You made it sound like something mundane.”

“They used to happen a lot before, but after the Great War, it was agreed upon that those challenges were to be uttered with caution. We couldn’t afford to lose more of us over trivial feuds."

“There’s nothing trivial with Seungwon.”

“I know, but those challenges happen very, *very* rarely. Even in cases when a dragonborn actively harms another one, it’s usually settled through the Council."

"And when they do happen, it's caused by what?"

"For example, Dragonborn N°1 is interested in mating a mated Dragonborn N°3, and so Dragonborn N°1 and N°2 will fight for N°3 if Three agrees.”

“Why would Two’s mate agree to this?”

“I don’t know,” Taehyung shrugs. “Unhappy marriage, better assets. More money and influence. Maybe fear too. Humans are vain, but dragonborns can be as well.”

“What if the mate’s mate doesn’t care?” Jungkook's gaze locks with Taehyung. “Let’s say someone challenges you for me, would you fight?”

“It’d depend.”

“On what?”

“Our marriage isn’t one born from love, so in a case like this one, I wouldn’t fight for you, per se, but rather for what benefits I gain from being married to you, which is what most arranged marriages are about,” Taehyung honestly answers, perhaps too much so. “So the chances of me fighting the one who’d challenge me for you are high, unless I have a good reason not to.”

“I see,” Jungkook says with a cold temper. “That explains why you just watched and did nothing. Because it was useful to you. Because *I* was.”

“Something like that.”

The halfhearted admission leaves a bitter taste on Taehyung's tongue.

“You know,” Jungkook begins and tosses the bloodied tissue in the sink, “if you had told me about the blood for blood ordeal, if you had told me that this could be what it takes to get rid of Seungwon once and for all, I would’ve accepted without an ounce of hesitation. I can take a punch or two or three or more.”

“As I said, I didn’t not intervene with that thought in mind. I assumed you’d defend yourself,” Taehyung counters, the irritation swirling with the ever rising discomfort in his chest.

“It still took a punch for you to move.”

“I did nonetheless.”

“Don’t scheme behind my back, especially when I’m the one involved, whether it’s an afterthought or not. You don’t get to use me. Ever. I never was Seungwon's doll and I'm certainly not yours either.”

Taehyung’s gaze flits on Jungkook’s throat where some purple bruises are blooming. Seungwon’s grip around Jungkook’s neck has been a lot more bruising than Taehyung had realized: some of the sharp edges of the necklace have sunk into the skin and nipped it where the wing is, leaving a bruising imprint of the necklace and Seungwon’s fingers around Jungkook’s throat.

The realization that the writhing discomfort is a growing guilt is sudden, odd in its viciousness aimed at Taehyung.

Taehyung does not experience guilt very often, let alone for a human. Kija and his family have always been the only exception to this. He has always been the kind to apologize and correct his mistakes, rather than dwell on his feelings.

So Taehyung is lost.

He doesn’t know how to navigate the riddling guilt, nor what to do to make it go away.

“I should have stopped him earlier.”

“Yes. You should have. You told me to come to you if Seungwon does anything to me, and yet when something did occur, how did you react? With indifference, Taehyung. You've done nothing. Your words are worthless promises,” Jungkook says with a tired chuckle. “God knows safety isn’t something I’ve known very often, but when you said you'd be there for me if— Doesn’t matter.”

“I didn’t think about your position. I genuinely assumed you’d hit him back or have the basilisk bite him.” Taehyung peers at the snake that hisses and sniffs the jar of antiseptic.

“Her name is Revna, and I wanted to, but I can’t stab Seungwon like a madman and risk everything.”

“Yeah.” Taehyung averts his eyes. “I’m realizing that now.”

“You’re an idiot.”

The dragon necklace clangs on the ceramic of the sink when Jungkook removes it to start cleaning the bruises around his throat.

Neither of them speaks for a while, but the terseness is broken by Jungkook who conceals the traces Seungwon has left behind on his skin.

“Apologies truly are your worst nemesis.”

“It’s not easy for me to apologize to a human, whether they deserve it or not.”

“Oh boohoo. The great Kim Taehyung is too prideful to apologize.”

“This isn’t about my damn pride."

“Then what? You can be so bigoted sometimes with your hatred for humans. I’m trying really, *really* hard to be understanding about it, despite the fact that I don’t have to at all. I know something must have happened to you that was obviously provoked by humans but— But God. You make it more and more difficult to evince any kind of empathy for you.” Jungkook finishes his tirade with the click of the antiseptic jar that he closes shut.

“You don’t understand.”

“Because you refuse to talk.” Jungkook's gaze bores into the side of Taehyung’s head. “Because you can’t open up about anything, whether it be mundane matters or more personal ones. Our discussion in the solarium still feels like a fevered dream. I’ve been understanding and patient with you, and all you've given me in return is indifference and scorn.”

Taehyung has half a mind to exit the bathroom. Maybe the guilt will stop then.

“It’s not that easy," Taehyung says.

“Maybe, but you don’t even try. *This* is what annoys me the most. We’re married now, whether you accept it or not. We’ve been living together for over a month, and while it's been fairly cordial due to a mutual ignorance, you could at least help me understand why it's not easy for you. But you prefer deflecting. Rejecting. I know humans are horrible, and have been since the beginning of time, but I'm— I'm not them and—"

Jungkook pauses and when he doesn’t continue, Taehyung peers at him, their gazes meeting.

“You know about me. I’ve given you the two most important tokens in my life, but even with those, you don’t trust me enough to not be a complete ass to me and I just— I don’t understand you, and I don’t know if I want to anymore.”

“Nothing was done to my family,” Taehyung rushes to say because a sense of urgency swells in him, one that he doesn't understand the origin of. “It happened to me.” The admission is caustic on his tongue. “S'why no one beside me can understand or relate, which is fine. I don’t expect you to. I know my hatred for humans became irrational but I can’t help it, and I don’t care enough to change anything about it.”

Jungkook sighs. His eyes drift low where his hands are fiddling with the dragon necklace. “Have you ever talked about what happened to anyone?”

Taehyung shakes his head. The shame had always been too grand. The fear too.

“Not even your parents or Jimin?”

Taehyung shrugs. Aside from Minsoo, Taehyung had refused to let any member of his family see him for the first few weeks of his convalescence

The look Jungkook fixates Taehyung with is unmistakably exasperated.

“What?”

“When something bad happens to you, if you bottle everything up for years, healing from it can be really difficult. Especially for emotionally constipated people like you. No wonder you’re such a prick.”

“Fuck off.”

“You should talk about it. It’s freeing.”

Taehyung doubts he can ever be freed from his nightmares. They’ve carved scars that were engraved within him for far too long.

“You should,” Jungkook insists.

Perhaps, but Taehyung won’t. “Maybe another day.”

“Have you found them again? Those who did what they've done to you.”

“No.”

Jungkook’s eyes lose a bit of their edge. “That must be scary.”

It’s terrifying, Taehyung thinks but does not say.

Sometimes so much so that, because he’s too worried of waking up in an unknown room, sleeping becomes an impossible feat, leaving him unable to rest for days until he eventually passes out from fatigue. Other times Taehyung can’t bear the idea of being in his human form and so he stays in his dragon one, feeling safer this way.

Taehyung does not think he’d survive the same nightmare again.

“Revna doesn’t need to sleep,” Jungkook says, scratching the basilisk’s chin who erupts into a series of clicks of the tongue. “But when she does, it’s always with an eye open, so she’s a really good guard.”

Taehyung wordlessly surveys Jungkook as the latter raves about the basilisk who seems to appreciate the attention because she nibbles on Jungkook’s wrist and rubs her snout against it.

“Why am I saying this when I’m supposed to be rightfully mad at you. Prick,” Jungkook mutters after a couple minutes. “Making me worry and care when you don’t deserve it with how you’ve been with me and—”

“I’m sorry.”

It’s strange, how the words aren't as bitter as he had expected them to be. Instead, they're quite relieving, and the tightness in Taehyung’s chest alleviates the slightest bit.

Jungkook is frozen next to Taehyung. He stares. Then he blinks before staring some more.

Awkwardness rises at the endless silence.

“Why—”

Jungkook has the same look he had worn when Taehyung had proposed a discussion about each other’s physical boundaries. Taehyung still can’t decipher it, but the exact same words come to his mind as Jungkook visibly softens.

Then, a sly, teasing smile tugs at Jungkook’s lips. “*Now*,” he starts with an overly sweet voice, “it wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

Taehyung’s muscles that had tensed unwind. “Considering that saying it burnt my tongue, I’m not so sure,” he dramatizes with a certain goal in mind that comes to fruition when Jungkook relaxes.

“You’re an idiot,” Jungkook huffs. “Do you mean it? Or did you apologize to ease your guilty conscience?”

“Both.”

"Mostly the former or the latter? Or is it equal?"

Taehyung gnaws on the inside of his cheek. "Mostly the former."

“That’s progress. Thank you.”

Taehyung’s nose wrinkles. “You’re not supposed to say thank you to someone apologizing.”

“Have you ever heard of communication, Taehyung? You should try it sometimes.”

Taehyung ignores the jab to say “You’re done?”

“I think I covered everything except the back of my neck. Can you check it, please?”

Taehyung shuffles behind Jungkook. Some scratches and lingering imprints of Seungwon's fingers mark Jungkook’s nape. Taehyung forsakes the pinch near his heart in favor of taking the wet napkin and carefully swapping it across the faint wounds.

Taehyung isn’t a very tactile man. He does not embrace or kiss — although he doesn’t mind when his parents or Jimin hug him. He likes the affection from his family, but he never goes out of his way to seek it, able to happily live without it.

So when he presses his index and middle finger on Jungkook’s nape to smear the antiseptic pomade across Jungkook’s skin that is, akin to his hair, unexpectedly soft, Taehyung is *stiff.* The last time Taehyung had a physical contact with a human had been nothing remotely close to the calm and gentleness that happens here.

It's as alien as it is unnerving.

He waits for a shoe or knife to drop. For blood and violence to implode. For someone to barge in because everything has been a ploy since the very first day.

Yet none of that occurs.

Instead, Jungkook hums a lullaby to himself as he converses with the basilisk, the latter responding in her own language to him.

“This feels nice,” Jungkook confesses, who grants Taehyung a vulnerability the dragonborn could only dream of mustering.

“What does?”

Jungkook’s shoulders shake. “Nothing. Forget it.”

Taehyung clicks his tongue. “Tell me.”

“No. You’d know if you weren’t so oblivious.”

Taehyung is about to respond when he feels the way Jungkook’s skin pebbles under the pulp of his fingers. He pauses. His brows further knit.

Had Jungkook been referring to Taehyung’s touch?

Taehyung discards the absurd thought to focus back on his task. The foundation mingles perfectly with Jungkook’s skin tone as Taehyung spreads it to cover the bruises. He glances at the mirror when he feels watched. “What?”

“Nothing. Just admiring my husband’s beauty.”

Taehyung rolls his eyes as Jungkook chuckles. “Shut up.”

“I mean it,” Jungkook exclaims. “Sometimes it randomly hits me how handsome you are in spite of all the…” He makes a vague motion of his hand.

Taehyung finishes his task with a glower. “All the what?”

“All of *that.* Exactly this,” Jungkook says and points at the mirror.

Taehyung does not zap Jungkook but he does give him a stony look as he washes his hands in the sink.

“Back in the ruby, Lovely. We’re leaving soon, and I'll let you out then, alright?” The basilisk petulantly snorts but obeys the request, vanishing inside her temporary ‘room’. “What about me?” Jungkook continues.

“Huh?”

“Am I handsome?”

Taehyung makes a face that hopefully comes off as a grimace.

“I saw that!”

“As I hoped so.” Taehyung summons his fire arcane to dry his hands. When he turns around, the acute point of a blade is presented to him. His gaze slowly drags upward to rest on Jungkook's face.

“Tell me I’m pretty,” Jungkook commands. The basilisk rests her head atop Jungkook’s, peering down at Taehyung. Taehyung arches a brow, unimpressed. “I still have the dagger.”

“That I can see.”

“So tell me I’m pretty.”

Taehyung makes a quick job of forming his own ‘blade’ with a dense and sharp wind that he envelops around two of his fingers. He slashes the dagger in a swift motion, half of it clattering on the bathroom’s tiles.

“You’re such a prick,” Jungkook laments and throws what’s left of the dagger in a bin.

“You’re married to that prick now."

“Technically, I married two pricks.”

It takes a few embarrassing seconds for Taehyung’s brain to process what Jungkook's jest, but when he does he says “Oh fuck off.”

Jungkook makes his way toward the exit door while snickering, Taehyung trailing after him. Jungkook unlocks the door but before he opens it, his head turns to watch Taehyung, his tone and expression somber. “You may repeat over and over again how you don’t care about me, which I can understand, but when my safety is endangered, no matter how much I can protect myself, I expect my husband to not simply stand there.”

Taehyung leans forward as he tilts his head to the side, a taunting smile on his lips. “But you were doing so well on your own, Viper.” It comes out more playful than derisive, to his dismay.

“At least get me a dagger, and only then will I forgive your inaction,” Jungkook fires. He twirls on his feet and swings the door open to exit the bathroom.

“Fucking viper.”

Jungkook’s head peeks through the doorway. “A rattlesnake would shake its tail in warning. I don’t. It would do you well to remember that."

“You’re threatening me now?” Taehyung says when he reaches Jungkook as the two of them walk side by side.

“No. A warning is different than a threat.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not and you’re just being your usual shrewd self.”

“Aww, a new thing you’re learning about me,” Jungkook croons and holds onto Taehyung’s arm. “But yes, maybe I am. On another note, how will you make up to me for the wounds I got tonight?”

“Why should I make up for it? I’m not the one who hurt you.”

Jungkook scowls at him, then his lips purse around a mumble. “Offer me something.”

“Like?”

“An outing. You could take me to a spot you like, somewhere high up.”

“You’re afraid of heights.” Taehyung shushes Jungkook’s incoming teasing with a glare.

“I’m learning not to be anymore."

It feels like a loaded answer for some reasons, one that Taehyung considers for a moment.

Taehyung sighs moments later. “Sure.”

“Really?!”

“Until you reacted like that, yes.”

Jungkook tweaks Taehyung’s arm. “Yes or no?”

“I said yes.” Taehyung supposes conceding an hour of two of his time for this should be bearable.

They soon arrive in the corridor leading inside the ballroom.

The party is still well on its way. The music is louder, the mindless chattering too as Taehyung and Jungkook approach.

“Jimin told me you both have a lot of favorite spots in the mountains. I think your grandfather lives over there, right? I haven’t met him yet, but do you think that…”

The rest of Jungkook’s question never reaches Taehyung’s ears. It’s swallowed by a scent, one that Taehyung could recognize amidst thousands more.

Taehyung stops dead in his tracks.

It’s uncanny how the fear doesn’t manifest itself at first, but rather a sense of calmness rooted in confusion. It’s punctuated by the prickle he has felt at the back of his neck throughout the night, however sharper now. Slowly, bell after bell *after bell* rings in his head.

The last time Taehyung had caught a whiff of this rancid mint and bitter coal had been mingled with the taste of blood suffusing every single one of his senses.

Yet it’s here again, six years later.

Taehyung’s feet lock, rooted on the ground. His eyes snap in any and every direction from the part of the ballroom he can see.

The place seems to have shrunk, feeling ten times smaller. *Suffocating.* He tries to look for a face he can place on the fetid scent, however his memories are jumbled together in a mess he has never been able to extricate himself from or—

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung startles.

He can’t find Jimin or his parents. Everything's drowned by the scent. It seems to become more potent as the seconds elapse, as though the person behind it is moving closer to Taehyung.

The palpitations begin, growing erratic and uneven, a dichotomy to how immobile Taehyung remains. His arcane flares alive, at least, ready to lash out the second it needs to.

Taehyung is torn out of his stupor by his fire breath that collects in his throat, swirling there.

He forces his legs to move but they're refusing to budged, *he's trapped again and —*

His legs move, eventually, coaxed by the urgency to increase the distance between him and the nearing scent.

He doesn’t know how long it takes him to raise a foot and place it behind his other one as he walks backward, deeper into the corridor and away from the ballroom. It’s only once he deems it safe enough to turn his back that he does so and races up the staircase.

Taehyung needs to get out of here right now.

They might be looking for him. *Again.* It’s the only reason why the man with the scent would be here and this time, Taehyung won’t let it happen. He’d rather die than be with *him* once more.

Taehyung isn’t sure how he got there, but he’s suddenly inside a room with bay windows and a glass door. He rushes toward it but before he can swing it open, fingers grab his elbow.

Taehyung swivels around. One of his hands balls up into a fist, ready to smash across the captor’s face while his other hand flies to the perpetrator’s throat, about to squeeze and squeeze and sque—

“It’s me."

Taehyung blinks to chase away the blurriness in his eyes.

“It’s just me, Taehyung,” the perpet— *Jungkook* — Jungkook says.

It’s Jungkook.

“It’s me.”

“I’m sor—" Taehyung immediately relents his grip. "I didn’t mean to—”

“I’m sorry. I was calling you but you didn’t seem to hear or see me at all…” Jungkook calmly says, unaware or uncaring of how closely he has brushed shoulders with death. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have grabbed you.”

Taehyung doesn’t let himself be consumed yet, whether it be by guilt or fear. He turns to grab the handle of the glass door and he must use more strength than necessary because it bends between his fingers as the glass shatters into pieces.

The winter air is cold against his ignited skin as he marches onto the balcony. The crunches of shoes stepping onto the glass follow him.

“Taehyung, what’s wrong?”

“I’m leaving." The scent is only a lingering presence now, but Taehyung doesn’t know for how long.

“What?”

“I’m *leaving.* I’m not staying here wh— I’m leaving.”

Taehyung peers outside.

The garden looks deserted. The forest surrounding it too.

Taehyung’s body jerks to turn into his dragon counterpart but he halts.

For all he knows, this is a bait to prompt him to leave. To isolate him and make him more vulnerable for an ambush. By leaving, Taehyung may do exactly what *he* wants.

“Wait. Taehyung.”

“Fucking shit.” If only he could find his family—

“What happened?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “Nothing.”

He paces around.

Staying is risky. Looking for his family or leaving also is. His eyes dart from the garden to the building.

He’s cornered.

One scent is all it takes to render him useless and *cowardly,* to make him unable to do anything, whether it be running away or stopping the tremors that run through his limbs.

“Fuck.” Taehyung raises a hand to his mouth when his fire breath rekindles in his throat.

“Is one of the humans here?”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook.

An internal debate swirls in him. Taehyung *knows* Jungkook has nothing to do with the nightmare he had gone through years ago. However, rationality evades his mind. The nagging voice won’t stop talking, hissing into his ears that anyone who isn’t his family is a potential threat.

“If you can’t trust me, you can trust Kija. Nothing about that night was a ploy to gain something from you. Plus I promised him I’d take care of you,” Jungkook says with a small smile, “even if you’ll deny needing any of it. Just… Let me help?”

Taehyung exhales against his hand, anchoring on the sting his nails elicit when they bite into the skin of his jaw. “There’s— There’s this smell. It was there back then. It was the exact same one, I know I’m not mistaking it for another. *I know it.* But I can’t find Jimin or my parents or anyone I can trust here to leave with and I don’t even know if I should leave or not because I could be playing right into their games if I do and—”

“Wait.” Jungkook raises his hands but drops them when it prompts Taehyung to take a step back. “What smell? Can you describe it to me?”

“You won’t detect it. You don’t have heightened senses."

“I don’t, but Revna does,” Jungkook answers, the basilisk draped around his shoulders. “She can track anyone.”

Taehyung hesitates for a moment but he eventually says “Rotten mint and coal. It’s— It’s peculiar and disgusting. It’s hard to miss.”

“You heard that, Lovely? Is the human a man?”

Taehyung nods.

“Alright. You’ve got everything you need?” Jungkook asks the basilisk who nudges Jungkook’s cheek then slides down his arm to slither underneath his vest. “Can you wait here for a few minutes?”

“Five minutes.” And then Taehyung will either be gone or crash through the ballroom to find his family.

“Thank you,” Jungkook says with a sigh that sounds relieved for some reason. “Wait for me.”

“Five minutes.”

“Ten? And if I’m not there by then, you can just leave.”

“Seven.”

Jungkook wordlessly exits the room.

Taehyung does not move from where he’s pacing on the balcony.

He counts in his head, going through his breaths to appease himself. There’s a staccato in his chest, more or less audible but always felt whenever he goes through the imaginary roulette of his arcane. It’s familiar and comforting, and so he focuses on it as he waits, his gaze drifting between the closed doors and garden.

Five minutes have passed. Still nothing.

Taehyung’s muscles are aching, his shoulders too, flexing and relaxing every few seconds.

Two more minutes go by, and Taehyung leaps off the balcony.

He summons his wings out, not reverting to his full dragon form yet. He flies up along the wall. He’ll have a better view on the rooftop, and he’ll be able to enter the ballroom from the outside rather than from a narrow corridor.

On his way up, he passes by what seems to be an office.

He recognizes Jungkook’s voice coming from inside, along with Seohyung and Sungmin. Unseen, Taehyung crouches atop the head of the window and listens.

“Why?” Seohyung asks.

“I know some things about him that you don’t,” Jungkook replies. “I want him gone.”

Him? Is ‘him’ Taehyung? It wouldn’t make sense though, right? They’re married now, so why would Jungkook—

“It isn’t that easy now.”

“I don’t care."

“Your tone, Jungkook,” Sungmin reprimands.

“You haven’t seen how callous and cruel he can be, unlike I have.” Jungkook is facing both of his parents. “You know nothing, as usual.”

Taehyung’s hands clench into fists, his teeth gritting together.

“He has to stay here. You have asked enough with Seungwon."

“I let it slide for Seungwon, who should not be here to begin with,” Jungkook says.

Taehyung straightens up, about to fly off.

“However, Dohyun is where I draw the line.”

Taehyung pauses, his ire fizzling out.

Dohyun.

The name is unknown to Taehyung.

“What line? You’ve never interacted with that man before.”

“It’s a fairly simple equation: Dohyun bothers Taehyung, so I want him gone."

“Dragonborns are changing you for the worse,” Seohyung snips with unbridled enmity. “Kim’s horrible son is.”

“Have Dohyun and whoever he came with leave. I want to see it happen with my own eyes. If you somehow allow him back inside or let him wander in the garden or forest…" Jungkook trails off. "Simply… Don’t.”

Seohyung stalks closer to her son. “This is the second time you have threatened us tonight, Jungkook."

“I’m doing my duties as Taehyung’s husband, one of them ensuring his well-being and happiness. Isn’t that what you want?” Jungkook smiles, sweet yet full of a dark promise.

A silence floats in the desk room.

Too restless to remain in the same place for too long, Taehyung resumes his flight up to the rooftop. Nothing seems out of the ordinary up there, but he knows better than to be lulled into a sense of security by a veneer of peacefulness.

Taehyung flies back to the room he had been in minutes ago. It’s still empty, devoid of a prince and his basilisk.

He wills away his wings as he drops down on the bed. His senses are on edge, flitting to every smell, shift in the air or sound that occurs. So when he catches a familiar pitter-patter, he recognizes it as Jungkook's footsteps

The door opens.

Jungkook enters and shuts the door behind him, a tad breathless. “You’re still here."

“Is he gone?”

“He is. I watched him leave. I waited until he was deep into the forest before coming back here. He left in a carriage along with two men. One of the horses was white and the other brown,” Jungkook describes and crosses the distance to sit next to Taehyung, however feet away. “I remember his face along with those of the two men with him, and Revna cataloged their scents, so she’ll be able to recognize them if need be. I don’t know the names of the other two men, but they might be in the compendium we have at the house, and if not, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find their names.”

Taehyung breathes a little easier. His arcane lessens in his chest, subsided to a calmer storm, however his body is still straining with uncertainty, unsure on if he should fly away or stay.

“Are you feeling better?”

“I’m not feeling worse.” Taehyung rolls his sore shoulders, hunched forward.

“Do you want to go downstairs? Or would you rather stay here? Or leave?”

Taehyung wants to say that making a decision right now is nigh impossible, but he reverts back to a safer yet unjustified snark. “Don’t start coddling me because you've seen me weak.”

“One: there’s a difference between coddling and taking care of someone. Two: being afraid doesn’t make you weak.”

“It does. It’s cowardly.”

“It doesn't. It’s survival instincts. It’s *smart.* Plus everyone has weaknesses. You do. I do. That Dohyun guy does as well. You're not that special, Taehyung.” Jungkook's eyes have a hint of playfulness in them when Taehyung peers at him.

Taehyung lowers his head as he exhales. His fingers tightly intertwine in an effort to fruitlessly abate their trembling.

A hiss erupts on his left from where Jungkook is sitting, and sure enough, the raven basilisk’s head appears in his peripheral vision.

“Revna, leave him alone,” Jungkook chastises. The basilisk turns her head to snuff at him. Jungkook tuts. “Speak better to me.”

Revna approaches Taehyung, soon reaching his thigh. She peers up at him with her round, carmine eyes, her tongue darting out every now and then. It’s as though she’s waiting for something.

Taehyung isn't certain of what, but she must find her answers when Taehyung does not reject her when she slithers on his lap.

“She’s been worried about you,” Jungkook confides.

The basilisk’s cold snout bumps against the back of Taehyung’s clasped hands. Her head squeezes between his wrists. She curls over his left forearm to slide underneath the right one. Then, after a quick glance at Taehyung, she tentatively rests her head above his hands.

He should be more concerned of having a deadly basilisk cuddling up to him. He should be frightened, really, yet the serpent’s presence; the weight of her head on his hands, the coldness of the silky scales and her sporadic hiss; are grounding.

The trembles in his hands are gone, Taehyung realizes minutes later.

“I can take her away if you want,” Jungkook offers. The basilisk cracks an eye open and shows her fangs to Jungkook. “*Revna*.”

“It’s fine,” Taehyung rasps.

“She’s very protective, as you've seen. It took a lot of convincing for her to not lash out on Seungwon or Dohyun."

The door swings open before Taehyung can answer.

He springs on his feet, his arcane immediately settling on the force aspect, ready to implode whoever is entering the room.

Jimin barges inside. Dahee and Junhyun are next along with Jungkook’s friends, and relief erupts within Taehyung, dizzying.

“Taehyung!” Jimin rushes to Taehyung’s side, patting his face, shoulders and chest. “Are you okay? Were you hurt? Jungkook asked us to come upstairs so I went to look for the parents but it took me some time to find them, they were outside and— Is the guy gone?”

“He is,” Jungkook reassures.

“My son.” Junhyun quickly walks toward Taehyung to touch his back, Dahee on his toes. “Are you well?”

“Yeah, I just—” Taehyung extracts himself from his father and Jimin to take a step back. “Need to get out of here but I don’t know if it’s safe.”

“This Dohyun *rat*, was he part of them?” Dahee asks.

Taehyung nods. "He has to be the man with the scent."

“I see. I see, my son.” The room falls quiet at the sharpness of Dahee's tone. Her fury is palpable, but it does not translate in her movements when she gently cups Taehyung’s cheeks. “We will find him, and if it is what you desire, we will bring him to you.”

“It… probably wouldn’t be to talk, right?” Namjoon pipes up, awkwardly standing at the entrance door.

Jungkook groans an *'Oh my God'* while Jimin and Junhyun chuckles.

"Yes. It most definitely would not be to have a civil chat with him, Namjoon," Dahee pointedly says.

"There might be more of them outside," Taehyung resumes, impatient to leave.

"What is going on?" Jungkook's warlock friend says.

"There's, uh, some guy. Terrible guy, really. I had him…" Jungkook makes a shooing motion. "Kicked out. Discreetly."

"And I suppose Taehyung is the one who asked, isn't he?" Yoongi says. "Who's to say he isn't the 'terrible guy' in the scenario? He had no qualms breaching Jungkook's privacy, after all."

Dahee's words curl with an accent proper to draconian. "Careful how you speak of my son, warlock."

"The same son that has been treating Jungkook like scum for the majority of their engagement," Yoongi fires back.

Jungkook sighs. "Trust me on this, Yoongi."

A hiss erupts in the room, and Yoongi's eyes flicker on Taehyung's chest.

It brings back to Taehyung's attention the basilisk that has entirely wrapped around one of his arms, her head sniffing at the pendant dangling between his collarbones. Taehyung peers at Jungkook. "Can you…" He motions toward the snake.

Jungkook retrieves a reluctant basilisk who, in protest, falls limp in his hold when he unwraps her from Taehyung's arm. "You're such a dramatic brat," he chuckles when the basilisk lazily gnaws on one of his fingers.

"If you want to leave," Dahee resumes, "we could tell the guests the both of you have disappeared to… have your fun."

Taehyung makes a moue at the connotation, but he'd take anything to not be here anymore, and so he agrees.

"That would work. No one would question their absence then for the dance since they're newlyweds," Namjoon muses.

The group converses some more about the technicalities. Jimin proposes to escort Taehyung and Jungkook toward their suite at the second citadel while the rest will remain here to handle the Queen and King and warn the guests of the departure.

A raven materializes in a swirl of ink that spills out of Yoongi's hand. The bird flutters to land on Jungkook's shoulder. "Take this one with you in case something comes up. It'll last for 24 hours."

Jungkook nods with a smile and scratches the underside of the raven's chin.

Taehyung watches with brief amusement the way the basilisk shows her fangs to the raven before reverting inside the ruby. "Let's move."

“I have to pick up my stuff. I’ll join you in a few,” Jimin warns before jogging through the entrance doors, followed by the rest of the group.

“Well.” Jungkook pauses next to Taehyung once they're both on the balcony. He peers at the garden, several three stories away from them. “I don’t have wings, unfortunately, so I can’t make that jump without breaking my legs in the same process.”

Taehyung grabs Jungkook by the waist and unceremoniously throws him over his shoulder.

“Taehyung!”

Taehyung vaults over the balcony and summons his wings mid fall while Jungkook mutters something about not being a sack of potatoes. He flies toward the back of the castle where no one is and he lands there, resting a frowning Jungkook on his feet.

Jungkook punches Taehyung’s chest. “You have got to *stop* doing that.”

“How else am I supposed to carry you?” Taehyung studies his surroundings, on high alert as he waits for Jimin to arrive.

“Bridal style is a good start. And it’s fitting."

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung’s head twists toward the feminine, raspy voice. He promptly bows when he sees the Elder, seemingly on her way out as well. “Elder Miseon, thank you for officiating the wedding. It was an hon—”

“Now, now,” the Elder crosses the distance to pat Taehyung’s head. “None of this, my child.”

Taehyung straightens up, Jungkook by his side and hooking his arm around Taehyung’s. “I was taken aback to see you there.”

“It was a fortunate happenstance.” Elder Miseon's laugh rings in the quietude in a rhythmic staccato. “I was to visit Amaris this week and presumed the wedding would prove itself to be a needed distraction.”

“Were you perhaps visiting for some important matter with the Queen and King?” Jungkook wonders.

“No.” Elder Miseon's timber sobers, however her smile remains. “A draconic matter. None related to Amaris.”

Taehyung’s eyes widen.

The plague?

“Why here? I thought—” Taehyung glances at Jungkook. “I thought we had time.”

“It is about an old excavation,” Miseon answers.

“I see."

“Nothing for you to worry about. Nor you,” Elder Miseon adds with a glance in Jungkook’s direction, “who is attentively listening.”

“I do enjoy solving mysteries. This one’s my favorite as of late." Jungkook points at Taehyung who bats his hand away.

“You may be of aid in the future, perhaps,” the Elder agrees, an amused glint in her eyes. “I must take my leave, lest the matter is found by an unfortunate passerby.”

“Of course. Thank you for tonight, once more,” Taehyung says with another small bow. He would usually be vibrating in excitement at meeting one of the most prestigious and loved Elders, but Taehyung is too skittish, restless to be as far away from the castle as he can.

The Elder kindly smiles at him and Jungkook, and with a wink thrown in their way, she turns to her dragon self and flies off.

Jimin arrives a few seconds later, already in his dragon form. Taehyung does not waste another second to join his friend in his dragon counterpart. After allowing Jungkook to climb on his talon, his wings swing up and down, the three of them flying toward the second citadel.

The nuptial room is vast, with a small opened kitchen on the left side and an en suite bathroom that Taehyung had already claimed to take a brisk shower. He'd felt too unsafe to unwind in a long bath, however being in a castle far enough from the citadel has quelled down some of his anstiness.

Jungkook has been locked inside the bathroom for the past half hour, his muffled arguing with the basilisk floating to the bedroom.

Jungkook has been acting a bit strange since he and Taehyung have arrived here.

The Prince is tense, for lack of a better word. It's as though Taehyung's restlessness has been transferred onto Jungkook now that Taehyung is feeling more relaxed.

When Jungkook exits the bathroom, it's with a slump in his shoulders that is contradicted by the resolution in his eyes. He's wearing silky, red pajamas, his damp hair messily falling over his forehead.

Taehyung stands from where he'd been sitting on a chair. He closes the windows, needing to do something to drive him away from the growing unease. He catches in the corner of his eyes the way Jungkook reclines against the wall near the entrance door.

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung's fingers still. “What?”

“Do you—” Jungkook’s lips press into a thin line. His gaze locks onto Taehyung, then he says “Do you want to consume the wedding?”

“*What?*”

“Do you want to consume the wedding,” Jungkook reiterates, although it sounds more like an accusation this time. “Have sex. Whether now or later.”

It hadn't crossed Taehyung's mind once since he had agreed to the marriage. “Do *you* want to consume it?” Is Jungkook interested in that? He has never shown any signs toward it.

“I'm asking you.”

“And I you.”

“What I want doesn't matter.”

“It certainly does with this since you'd be involved. What the fuck are you on about?” Taehyung walks toward the kitchen counter to lean against it, ankles crossed. “What you want matters, it simply doesn't to me.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that if you want bread you can have it, but I won't go out of my way to get it for you if you ask.”

Jungkook’s mouth parts around a quiet sound. “That was a weirdly good metaphor.”

“Now, asking again, do you want to consume the wedding?”

Jungkook quietly surveys Taehyung for a moment. The basilisk’s head drifts from left to right, her gaze darting between Taehyung and Jungkook.

“It depends,” Jungkook eventually answers.

“On what?”

“What will happen if I say no,” Jungkook answers, and Taehyung does not even try to hide his shock. “As I once said, Seohyung and Sungmin tasked me with doing everything in my power to, ah, keep my husband ‘happy and satisfied’. That, of course, extends to sex. There’s a reason why I had to ‘preserve myself’ for my future suitor, so to say,” he derides with a twist of his mouth and averts his eyes.

“I won’t ever force myself on you. I’m not— By the Elders, I’m not that kind of man.”

“I wasn’t necessarily referring to this in particular, or consent. You wouldn’t force yourself on me, I know that. This isn’t what I’m— I don’t know how to explain.” Jungkook rubs his palms over his face.

“Is this what happened with Seungwon?” Taehyung wouldn’t be surprised if an occurrence like this may have prompted the ear biting event.

“No, thankfully.” Jungkook pushes himself off the wall to sit on the bed. “I was sent to Seungwon's home at the time to assess our compatibility. One day his hands had been too adventurous for my taste and had gone too high up my thighs. So I told him off for it and pushed him away. He didn’t like it. He hit me. *I* didn’t like it.”

Taehyung should have done more to the dragonborn than break a wrist. “What happened after?”

“I pretended," Jungkook says with a cheeky smile. "Long story short, the night after he slapped me was the one where I bit his ear off. I assumed he would perhaps understand me better through a more drastic message.”

“Should’ve ripped his fucking face off,” Taehyung snips. “Disgusting pig. He’s worse than I ever thought and Elders know I’ve never held him in high regards.”

“It wasn’t anything bad,” Jungkook dismisses. He shuffles on the bed to crawl up toward the headboard and lays there. The basilisk follows suit, curling into a ball above Jungkook’s navel. “Just a hand on my lower back, and then a tad too high on my thigh.”

“It is bad the second someone touches you in ways you don’t want. There isn’t any ‘just’ in that, Viper.”

Jungkook tilts his head, pensively peering at Taehyung. “Yes, that is true.”

Taehyung wonders what could be done about Seungwon. The dragonborn has to be locked or incapacitated in some ways, preferably sooner.

“So you don’t want to consume the wedding?”

“No." Sex does not matter to Taehyung and never has. “Do you?”

“No.”

“Great. One of the very few things we’ll agree on.”

“I suppose,” Jungkook says through a yawn.

Only one king sized bed is there, which makes sense in a nuptial room, but it still annoys Taehyung that he has to lay down next to Jungkook if he wants to sit somewhere more comfortable.

Taehyung does anyway as he trudges toward the mattress and flops on the right side of it, Jungkook on his left. He won’t fall asleep at all, not with the putrid scent lingering in his head, but he might as well get some rest.

After perhaps half an hour of blankly staring at the ceiling, Taehyung heaves a deep sigh.

He can't unwind at all. Something is still bothering him.

Jungkook has made himself comfortable on the bed, nestled beneath the blankets.

“If someone does anything to you that you don’t want—”

“I should tell you so you won’t do anything and watch?”

“I apologized for that already. And it won’t happen again,” Taehyung mutters. “But you should tell someone, or at least bite them off and let her do the same. Actually, you could commission a dagger from Jimin. Probably should.”

The room falls quiet while Taehyung loses himself in his own mind.

Taehyung is convinced that Dohyun — if it truly is the name of the man with the scent — must have had a reason to be at the wedding. Perhaps born from this craving to torment. Or maybe to send a message.

A warning.

“I can hear your mind twisting and turning.”

“Yours would be too in my case."

“And what is your case?”

“Imagine someone you hate does something to you. You think they’ve been gone for years, but suddenly they appear ag—” Taehyung halts.

Jungkook snorts. “Your case sounds a tad similar to mine with Seungwon.”

That Taehyung has realized amidst his explanation.

Taehyung thinks of the now uncovered bruises on Jungkook’s throat. The guilt rears its ugly head but he shoves it down. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

Jungkook burrows half of his face in the crook of his folded arms, his words muffled. “Your case is worse than mine though.”

“Pain is relative.”

Quietness wraps around them for a while.

It's only when Taehyung feels this now familiar stare on him that he speaks again. "What?"

“You’re a yarn of mystery, Kim Taehyung.” Jungkook’s eyes are too honest again, full of an interest and something else that seems coy with the way he hides more of his face, only his eyes and top of the head peeking out. “Every time I believe I have unraveled you, you form another bow.”

“Can’t tell if it’s good or bad.”

“It’s good. Really good… You’re an enigma.” Jungkook's voice is quiet, slow and mellow. “You’re emotionally stunted, yet you can be emotionally smart in a simple way. You’re cold and distant, yet you can be warm and caring in your own quiet way. You abhor humans, yet you were kind toward Sohee.”

“What does all of that mean?”

“You wouldn’t go out of your way to get me bread, but if you visit a market for something you need where they sell bread, you’d get me a loaf.”

Those bread metaphors are as stupid as they are understandable.

“That doesn’t clarify anything."

The blanket shakes above Jungkook's shoulders, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You're full of contradictions. It's unexpectedly endearing. And sometimes infuriating too."

Taehyung has always considered himself as someone simple, with straightforward needs and desires, however he's aware of how the chaos within him can make it difficult for others to understand him, let alone appreciate him. So Taehyung is taken aback by the uncanny prince once more, who is not part of his family, yet appears to know Taehyung so much more than any other dragonborn peers. Jungkook even goes as far as *accepting* the flaws that make Taehyung, even if he playfully admonishes him every now and then

Jungkook seems to want to know more in spite of everything.

It's new.

New and—

"Have I shocked you speechless, husband of mine?"

Taehyung glares at Jungkook. "Don't call me that."

"Why not, Husband? Would you prefer a sweeter adjective to precede the word? Maybe Handsome Husband? Pretty Husband? Lovely Hus—"

Taehyung flicks a zap of lightning on Jungkook's forehead and pushes himself off the bed. "You're obnoxious." He needs some distance from the Prince who elicits a feeling akin to hope within Taehyung.

But why would I be? What am I even hoping for?

Jungkook is still no one to Taehyung, after all, aside from a husband in an arranged marriage, and a human.

Taehyung rummages through the cupboards, searching for some snack to munch on. They're depressingly empty. "Is there a pantry with some cooking supplies somewhere?" He asks, but no response arrives. "Don't tell me you've already fallen as—"

Jungkook is sitting up straight on the bed, his fists gripping at the blanket. His eyes are wide open. More notably, they're entirely black, similar to the tattoos that expand across his arms, throat and collarbones.

Taehyung warily watches. "Viper?"

Jungkook scurries off the bed to race to the balcony.

Taehyung leaves the kitchen to cautiously join the Prince. He remains at the entrance. His gaze scouts the garden and night sky for a presence.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Jungkook is leaning over the stone railing, his nape soon covered with the tattoos' intricate tendrils as flames flicker out of his mouth. "It's a soul. They're calling me, but… I can't see anything. I can't pinpoint where it's coming from. It's everywhere."

Jungkook's timber is wavering. Taehyung assumes at first that it's due to an upset, however when Jungkook's hands raise to hover next to his ears, the fingers trembling, Taehyung realizes where the agitation stems from.

Taehyung steps outside. He doesn't know if it's prudent for Jungkook to be out and about with his display of arcane, but the castle and its garden had been deserted when he and Jungkook had landed earlier.

"It's the same as before. It's the third time."

"Third time?" Taehyung echoes, his eyes narrowing.

"The first time I heard them was when we visited Vanae's market," Jungkook answers. "The second time was the same night I showed you my arcane, when I came back before we left the house."

So *this* was what had rendered Jungkook so aghast back then.

"The first two times were subtle. I wasn't sure of what I heard, if it *had* been a soul," Jungkook continues. "But the second time was still a lot more eerie than the first. I don't get scared easily, but that one did frighten me."

Tonight as well, Taehyung thinks to himself. The basilisk herself looks shaken up, still around Jungkook's shoulders. Taehyung's gaze examines their surroundings but he can't catch any translucent form. "Are you hearing it right now?"

The basilisk goes back inside the ruby without a sound.

"No, it stopped."

"What stopped?"

"The scream." Jungkook lifts a hand to his necklace, holding both onto Taehyung's scale and the ruby. "Taehyung, it…." He reaches out to grip the sleeve of Taehyung's shirt. "It wasn't a human scream. It sounded like a dragon."

Taehyung is not even surprised.

This wedding ceremony has been an absolute clusterfuck, and why not add an apparently agonizing dragonborn soul on top of it all?

"You heard a dragon's roar?"

Jungkook nods. His fingers relent for a moment to properly curl around Taehyung's arm.

"Have you ever seen the soul of a dragonborn before Kija?" Taehyung questions, and the name is accompanied by this newfound peaceful grief.

"Never. Kija was the first."

"Many dragonborns have died in your land."

"There was never a single dragonborn soul at the citadel, nor in the place I'd visit on Amaris' lands and at the Seven Isles. At least none that I know of. After meeting Kija, I noticed that there's a

difference between him and regular humans: a dark pocket at the center of his chest. It had never been there for any other souls I had encountered. You probably couldn't see it. I think only I can because of my eyes."

"You were seeing his breath pouch," Taehyung muses.

"I've always assumed I couldn't communicate with dragonborns' souls until I arrived here."

"Considering the violence of what was done to us and our ancestors, the souls themselves must have been expunged to nothingness."

"Maybe." Jungkook glances at Taehyung before his head darts ahead. His clamp tightens on Taehyung, the tip of the fingers and nails digging into the skin, but Taehyung makes no mention of it. "Again. God, this is—" A shiver racks through Jungkook's form. His eyes change to their regular color. The tattoos and sigils begin to retract as well until they completely fade.

"I can't hear anything."

"I think they're talking directly to me. They can only reach me 'cause of my necromancy and they sound so—" Jungkook staggers away from the railing and Taehyung. "So *pained.* I can nearly feel it. S'too much."

Taehyung is hit with a sudden epiphany that had not crossed his busy mind up till now.

Jungkook is a necromancer.

He can speak with the dead if their soul has stayed behind.

The dead and skeletons *litter* Taehyung's basement at his former home, and the night with Kija along with this one has proven that Jungkook *can* effectively communicate with a dragonborn soul, so what if can communicate with a dragonborn who has died from—

"Taehyung, I'm scared," Jungkook whines and crouches to curl in on himself, his breathing picking up. "I want to go back inside and—" He startles. His hands fly to his ears, palms pressed against them. "It's not stopping. I can't make it stop. It won't *stop.* "

An idea flickers in Taehyung's mind.

He starts with his fire breath, then a sphere of wind and lightning is next that he concentrates in the sky. The forming thunderstorm is nowhere near as vast as the one he had created during the ring exchange. He only needs enough to cloud the balcony.

Thunder booms above them a minute later, cutting through Jungkook's litany of *'Make it stop'* and *'It hurts'* . Rain begins to drizzle, light for the moment.

Taehyung slowly approaches Jungkook. He rests a hand between Jungkook's shoulder blades. "Come on," Taehyung urges. Jungkook does not budge, and so Taehyung tugs him up on his feet to guide him inside the bedroom.

Jungkook looks shell-shocked, his eyes glassy and attention flitting.

"Stay there," Taehyung instructs. Not that Jungkook would leave from where he's frozen in place, crouched in on himself, palms still clasped over his ears.

Taehyung opens wide every single window in the nuptial suite, including the two glass doors leading to the balcony. Soon enough, the thunderstorm rumbles fills the room and hopefully drowns any other noise in the area.

Taehyung walks back to Jungkook and crouches in front of him. He takes a hold of Jungkook's wrists to lower them, but the Prince is unexpectedly strong, fighting back against Taehyung's pull. Taehyung pushes anyway and manages to move Jungkook's palms away from his ears.

"Listen."

Jungkook blinks through the drops that cling onto his eyelashes. The rain is loud, and so is the lightning that snaps outside every couple dozen of seconds. However it does not suffice. Jungkook still jolts in between two whips of the thunder.

"'still too loud," Jungkook confirms through a slurred mumble. "And it won't stop, it's hurting me. It's never this— This overwhelming. Hasn't been in—" Jungkook flinches.

Taehyung wonders how deep Jungkook's empathy goes when it concerns a soul's ailment, if it sometimes borders on alienation. "What can you hear?"

"The screaming and crying and—"

"Not that." Taehyung squeezes Jungkook's wrists to grab his attention. Jungkook looks up at him, and only then does Taehyung continue. "What can you hear in three, two, one…"

Thunder booms on cue, lightning erupting with it and illuminating the bedroom for a split second.

"Thunder."

Taehyung throws a gust of lightning out the window, this one with an arcane potent enough to intensify the storm. "Count up to seven," Taehyung directs. Jungkook's pulse is wild under the pad of Taehyung's fingers. The skin on skin touch isn't nearly as bothersome as it'd usually be with a human — or anyone else for that matter.

Jungkook counts out loud, and when he utters the number seven, it's accompanied by thunder.

"What can you hear?"

"Thunder again. Crying too. I don't know what to do, to make it stop." Jungkook's voice quavers through an aborted sob. He looks down at his wedding ring, watching the diamond with the minuscule storm in it.

A newfound idea pops into Taehyung's mind.

"Count to five."

"One, two, t—three, four— Thunder." Jungkook surveys Taehyung.

"It's coming closer," Taehyung clarifies Jungkook's quiet question. "Count again. Keep doing so. Out loud so I can hear you."

While making sure Jungkook continues to count, Taehyung makes his way to the balcony. He creates a half opened sphere the size of a snow globe, its 'wall' made of wind. He throws the ball

high in the raging sky where it mingles amidst the gray clouds that have formed there.

It doesn't take long for a fraction of the surrounding clouds, rain and lightning seep inside the sphere. Taehyung drags it down with a wave of his hand.

Taehyung rejoins Jungkook and lowers so their eyes meet.

“Look, and listen.”

Taehyung presents the storm trapped in the ball of wind. It’s transparent enough to see the lightning that flashes in it, and it’s sufficiently dense in arcane and electricity to reverberate through the bedroom. The droplets of rain add a pitter-patter to the ambient downpour, further blanketing Taehyung and Jungkook.

“Show me your hands.”

Jungkook silently obeys, and Taehyung rests the sphere between Jungkook's palms.

“The thunder outside happens every twelve seconds. The one in the sphere does every three seconds. Focus on those two and keep counting for me, yes?”

“Okay,” Jungkook croaks out. His timber is less strained, his frame not as tense anymore.

Taehyung stands and lightly kicks Jungkook’s shin. “And don’t stay in front of the opened window, dumbass.”

Jungkook mumbles something between ‘prick’ or another insult of that kind, but he rises to his feet. He doesn't mention the soul’s cries again.

Taehyung takes a minute to increase the storm outside one last time, loud enough to further submerge anything the soul may say, however not to a point where Taehyung won't be able to hear if someone passes by.

When Taehyung turns around, Jungkook is sitting on the bed. His focus is entirely riveted on the sphere, as Taehyung had hoped.

“I’m holding a storm," Jungkook breathes out. "A storm globe."

Jungkook looks enthralled by Taehyung’s arcane anew. It seems genuine, for lack of a better word. There is no growing ill-intent or fear behind it, unlike what Taehyung has experienced from other humans, and sometimes his own peers. Only a candid awe seeps into Jungkook's voice, shaken by the waves of goosebumps pebbling his skin.

Taehyung retrieves the storm globe from Jungkook who gives him an affronted look. “Get under the blanket before you freeze to death and blame me for it."

Jungkook promptly does as demanded, cuddling up beneath the covers. “I’m freezing.”

“Obviously." Taehyung drops the storm globe on Jungkook's pillow. "What can you hear?”

A small smile curves Jungkook’s lips. He brings the sphere closer to his face, lips brushing across the curve. “Thunder and rain… Smells nice too.”

Taehyung sifts through a wardrobe to retrieve a bundle of blankets. “It’s called petrichor, the scent that appears before, during or after it rains."

“I didn’t know. It’s a pretty word, isn't it?”

Taehyung hums in agreement.

He haphazardly throws the additional blankets over the bed, a heap forming where a chuckling Jungkook is. After turning off the bedroom and kitchen's light, he finally slides under the blankets. A yawn escapes his mouth. The amount of arcane he's used today has exhausted him, but he knows he won’t be catching any slumber tonight.

He glances at Jungkook who’s laid on his side and facing Taehyung, the storm globe between them. The basilisk appears to share Jungkook’s fascination because she’s darting her tongue at the sphere, probing at it with her snout and jerking away seconds later with a shake of her head.

“What would happen if I tried to put my hand inside the globe?”

“Death.”

A flash of dread passes on Jungkook’s face, washed away by a scowl. He smacks Taehyung’s arm. “Tell me."

“This storm isn't that charged in electricity. You’ll feel tingles, maybe some prickling because of the lightning. Your hand will be damped from the rain and clouds too.” Taehyung preemptively lessens the density of the wind surrounding the sphere with a graze of his fingers.

Jungkook takes that as a permission to poke the globe, his index passing through the barrier of the wind. “Oh.” He does it again but this time his full hand traverses the storm in the sphere. His fingers wiggle as he emits a small giggle as they do, lightning dancing across his skin. “It does tickle,” he says before retracting his hand to wipe it on the sheets and tub the comforters higher up his form.

Taehyung summons his fire breath, warming himself up. If it also warms Jungkook, it’s a serendipity rather than a conscious gesture.

The silence that settles in the room is only disrupted by the storm raging over the citadel and the one inside the globe, both soothing Taehyung.

He’s eager to be back home in Vanae even if he has been gone for barely a couple days.

He misses his land already. Its comfort and safety. Taehyung hasn’t gone hunting with his squadrons for some time as well, and so an angsty energy has been collecting within him that waits to be released.

Maybe he could take a day off first to carve a little, Taehyung muses. Making the storm globe has given him some designing ideas he wants to sculpt.

Jungkook shuffles closer to Taehyung. "I'm so warm."

“If you’re gonna complain that you’re too hot now, I’ll—”

“Shh. I’m comfy. Don’t ruin it.”

Taehyung scoffs.

He doesn't mind sharing the same bed with Jungkook as much as he had thought he would. Taehyung wouldn't say that he's cozy *at all* , but he isn't any more uncomfortable than if he were standing next to the Prince. However Taehyung does grow a tad on edge when Jungkook stares at him for the umpteenth time.

"You've been spending half of your time looking at me. Stop that."

Jungkook lazily blinks. "Thank you. For helping me. I know how to deal with this and my arcane on my own, but—" He's interrupted by a yawn. "Sometimes it gets… It gets too much, you know?"

Yeah.

Taehyung knows.

"It never gets like it did earlier though. Not anymore."

Taehyung's curiosity for arcanes — and Jungkook's in particular — flickers alive. "Would it happen a lot when you were younger?"

Jungkook nods. "I didn't know how to compartim— Comparimen— Compart—" He huffs and mutters under his breath. "M'too sleepy."

"Compartmentalize, yes."

"Mhm, that. I was too young. And scared. And lost. 'Cause imagine waking up one night and seeing a bunch of dead people's ghosts around you?"

Taehyung grimaces.

"It's not like that anymore, and I don't get scared by them now, but earlier it was too much, and different."

"You said you could feel the dragonborn's pain," Taehyung begins and Jungkook makes a noncommittal sound of agreement, his eyes closed. "Where?"

"Somewhere in my chest, above my heart, but more at the center?"

Where a dragonborn's breath pouch is, Taehyung contemplates.

"Why?"

"No reason."

"M'kay." Jungkook yawns again, his bleary eyes opening to peer at the storm globe. "Your arcane is really pretty."

"Sleep."

Jungkook hums before he and the basilisk entirely disappear under the cover. His head peeks out again a moment later. "I can't hear the storm as much under the blankets," he complains to Taehyung.

Taehyung sighs. He adds another layer of dense wind around the sphere to ensure that it can't be crushed by anything. It muffles the sounds of the thunder and rain a bit, but this is the most Taehyung is willing to do at the moment. Quiet and sleep now."

Jungkook snorts. "Goodnight."

Perhaps half a minute passes until Jungkook's breath hushes to a slow and even rhythm.

Taehyung frowns. He lifts the covers to see that Jungkook has, indeed, *already* fallen asleep. The basilisk is nuzzled against Jungkook's chest, curled into a ball. A waft of petrichor flows from where Jungkook is hugging the storm globe.

Taehyung lowers the blankets and climbs off the bed.

He pauses at the balcony's frame. He breathes out a cone of wind that he aims at the sky, spreading out the clouds and abating the rain. His lids fall shut, head tilted backward. He takes in the aftermath of the storm, the scent of petrichor pungent enough to erase the one of putrid mint and coal.

He stays outside for a while, leaning against the railing and peering at the clearing sky and wet grass that shines where it catches the moonlight.

Taehyung eventually reenters the bedroom and finds his place under the blankets with an exhausted grunt.

"The storm outside s'gone?" Jungkook mumbles, only his face peeping out of the comforters.

"I cleared it. I'm not making another one."

"'kay. M'good now."

"What can you hear?"

Jungkook emits a soft sound. "The storm globe. You… Your breathing and voice, s'nice."

"Sleep."

Chapter End Notes

About Jungkook's *"Technically, I married two pricks."*: "prick" has different meanings. One of them is used to refer to a despicable person, and another is a vulgar way to say "dick." So when Jungkook says he married two pricks, he means that he married Taehyung and Taehyung's dick XD

According to what I have planned, this story is split into three arcs, (the first focusing on the marriage and Taekook's cohabitation as you've seen), and this chapter officially concludes the end of this first arc. After over 140k words... I don't even know what to say… I swear I never meant for this story to be THIS long and slow burn but then I kept writing and worldbuilding and plotting and here we are 😭 Initially I estimated that it'd be around 150k words max and

lo’ and behold, after nearly reaching that much, we’re still faaar from the end shsjhb I hope you’ve been liking it thought and buckle up for all this is too come 👀🤍

Thank you so much for your comments by the way, I’ve been quite insecure about this story so they truly mean everything to me and the fact that some of you also take the time to comment on several chapters makes me really really happy so thank you T____T 🤍

Next update should be this upcoming week!! My chapters are quite long (usually always over 10k) so it might take me a week or a little over a week to have a chapter out!!

❧ Twitter

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook holding a storm globe made by artwithcloud

Chapter 12: A Raven's Umbrage and Serendipity

Chapter Summary

A misunderstanding erupts. Meanwhile plans are formed here and there, leading Taehyung, Jungkook and their friends to a trip to the Seven Isles.

Chapter Notes

It's such a long chapter and the longest of the story so far I'm sorry, I don't even know how that happened XDDD But enjoy this chapter 👀🤍

Cw:

1) Panic attack.
Starts at = "The chains — ink? — constricting Taehyung's body vanish…", ends at = "Taehyung sits up with his mother and Jimin's help…"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung has, quite literally, passed out last night it seems.

He doesn't remember falling asleep to begin with, only closing his eyes for a brief moment and opening them again now.

His mind is still wrapped in the somnolence of his slumber that, to his utmost surprise, has been incredibly refreshing. It's as though he has gotten the chance to have an uninterrupted twelve hours of sleep for the first time in Elders know how long, and from the bright sunlight that bathes the nuptial room, it may be true.

A yawn is torn out of his mouth. He tries to lift his left arm to rub at his eyes and chase away the remnant of his lethargy.

His arm is gone, however.

Taehyung fully jerks awake.

His mind processes several things at once.

First is the grim floral scent that suffuses his nose below him. Second is the weight — *weights?* — heavily draped over him: one of them is on his chest and the heaviest, the other is on his navel, much lighter.

Taehyung cranes his neck as he lifts his head.

He blinks.

He's met with deep, carmine eyes, the basilisk is peacefully resting on Taehyung's belly.

The third matter his mind comprehends is that his arm hasn't been unexpectedly torn from him in the middle of the night. It's still there, but it has been commandeered by Jungkook who's half laid atop Taehyung, the bird nest of black hair all that Taehyung can see when he looks down a second time. Taehyung tries not to think about how long he and the damn viper have been sleeping in this position but he fails, his numb arm a testimony of the hours it has spent underneath Jungkook's weight.

Taehyung's head flops back on the pillow. He glares at the innocent ceiling.

He can't believe this.

He should have woken up whenever the Prince had decided to take residence on *Taehyung's chest.* Hell, Taehyung would have considered throwing Jungkook out the window for such an offense, and he's about to do exactly that as he grabs the back of Jungkook's shirt, however the basilisk cracks an eye open.

Taehyung pauses in his motion.

Her snout nudges his belly and the *fangs* do, punctuated by a snuff.

"Wh— Was that a *threat*?"

The basilisk, to Taehyung's affront, nods. It's also at this moment that he realizes how alarmingly close to his crotch the basilisk is. Taehyung isn't about to risk the well-being of his junk quite yet, so instead of throwing Jungkook away, he says "Viper. Get off."

The basilisk relaxes once more.

"Viper. Fucking wake up."

Jungkook mumbles something intelligible but he doesn't move from where he's suffocating Taehyung to death. If anything, he slings an arm over Taehyung's abdomen as he presses himself closer and buries his nose on Taehyung's chest.

Taehyung snatches the collar of Jungkook's shirt. The snake gives him a warning look. "I will kill you if you bite my dick, you hear me you damn reptile? Get off of me. Both of you. Viper!"

Jungkook startles awake. He raises on his elbows, stabbing Taehyung's stomach in the same process. He peers at Taehyung through half closed, puffy eyes, his tousled hair falling over his forehead. He mutters a question that sounds like an indecipherable *'Hmphg?'*

"Get off of me!"

Jungkook's lids peel open. They flutter and cast soft shadows over his cheeks from the sunlight that swathes Jungkook's form like some kind of holy halo the prince does not deserve.

Jungkook surveys Taehyung once more. Properly this time. "Oh."

“Yes. Oh. Now *move.* I have to go to the bathroom.”

In an answer that prompts Taehyung's mouth to open around a burst of outrage, Jungkook flops back on top of Taehyung with a content sigh. “M’comfy,” Jungkook useless supplies, as though the way he nestles his cheek against Taehyung’s chest isn’t enough of an indication that he, indeed, is 'comfy'.

“I will piss on the bed if you don’t move and *you* will be the one to clean it."

Jungkook is immune to the venom in Taehyung's warning because his shoulders shake around a quiet laugh.

“I’m throwing you out the window in five seconds. Five, four—”

Jungkook lifts his head and pouts. “Why are you so noisy in—”

Taehyung’s hand smacks over Jungkook’s mouth when the latter speaks directly toward his nose. “By the Elders. Your morning breath is the most atrocious thing. Get away from me.”

Jungkook scowls and bats Taehyung’s hand away. “It’s not that bad,” he says after blowing in his palm and smelling his own breath.

“Three two one,” Taehyung rapidly fires.

He seizes Jungkook by the collar of the shirt, then the basilisk by her neck, and he effortlessly shoves them both to the other side of the bed. If Jungkook ends up tumbling down on the wooden floor, it’s none of Taehyung’s damn business.

Taehyung races to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. After relieving himself and washing his hands, he steps out again and sees that Jungkook is laid under the blankets again, his eyes closed.

Taehyung walks to the balcony. The sun is setting high up. Taehyung estimates the time to be around 1 pm or 2 pm.

He makes his way toward the kitchen and he must have not properly scoured the place yesterday because he finds some food in the lower cupboards along with a moka pot and some ground coffee.

He’s halfway through fixing himself a cup when he feels, then notices a spot on his gray shirt.

Taehyung’s gaze darts on his chest. He gawks. “You drooled on me!”

“I don’t drool.”

Taehyung wordlessly points at the disgusting wet patch right as Jungkook’s head peeks out from the blanket.

Jungkook blinks a few times. “Well…” His gaze drags from Taehyung's feet to Taehyung’s head in a slow, deliberate gesture. “You are a sight to behold, dear husband. It makes my mouth water.”

“You’re fucking revolting."

Jungkook bursts into laughter, leaving the bed to disappear inside the bathroom.

The morning — or rather early afternoon — is quite peaceful as Taehyung and Jungkook both consume their coffee and breakfast. They both shower and get dressed with the change of clothes neatly folded on a dresser.

Taehyung sighs in relief when back into the comfort of his cargo pants and simple black tee.

Once done with their morning routine, Taehyung and Jungkook stash their clothes from yesterday into a leather bag before trudging to the third floor. They enter one of the meeting rooms there, greeted by their friends and family.

“Good morning, lovebirds,” Jimin chirps. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Good morning,” Jungkook grins, walking up to them.

Taehyung trails behind.

“Good morning, Son,” Junhyun and Dahee say.

Jimin is nestled on a couch, right next to the warlock. Taehyung levels his friend with a stony look that Jimin responds to with a bright smile and a shrug. Jungkook settles on a loveseat, framed by Namjoon and Dahee, while Taehyung also sits on an armchair.

Or rather, he tries to settle down as he grabs onto the back of the chair to tug it back, however before he can move another finger, something collides onto him, punching the air out of his lungs.

Taehyung is propelled against the wall that cracks into a series of fissures from the impact. The bones in his shoulders groan under the pressure of what is pinning him to the wall and he hisses, shaking his head to dispel the dizziness.

Taehyung understands who the instigator of the attack is when his mother glares daggers at the warlock, barely held back by her mate from lunging at Yoongi. Jimin’s levity is gone too, replaced by a wrath that echoes with Taehyung’s.

“Yoongi!” Jungkook springs up. “What—”

“What the hell have you done to him?” Yoongi seethes as he stands from his seat to face Taehyung.

Taehyung tries to move but he can’t: his chest and arms are covered in ink, rope-like tendrils tying him against the wall. Their clamps tighten. They crawl up his shoulders and neck, the net of ink linked to Yoongi’s stretched arm.

“Yoongi! Stop! This isn’t—”

Taehyung yanks on his bindings but they’re not budging. He attempts to free himself but fails. His heart beat in his throat, feeling sick.

He can’t move.

“You’ve got the imprint of his fingers all over your neck! Your throat is *covered* in bruises that weren’t there last night,” Yoongi fires back. A grand raven bursts out of his other hand, towering over every single person in the room. “I’ll do to you what I should’ve done to Seungwon.”

“He’s goddamn heavy.”

“Come on, hurry it up. He’s waking up.”

“Everyone! Get ready to intervene! You two, make sure he’s tightened well.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Ain’t the warlock supposed to help?”

“That’s what these are for.”

Clangs of metal chains engraved in runes trail after the man’s word. The aching tightness around Taehyung’s wrists is next. He can't break free from the cuffs or chains. He's too weakened, at the mercy of —

Taehyung doesn’t know how he does it.

Perhaps he’s fueled by the fear and desperation provoked by the memories assaulting his mind. Or perhaps it’s the fury, coalescing in an explosive cocktail.

Taehyung can’t fully make out what is said, whether by those in the rooms or those in the memories. However his arm strains, the muscles flexing as it forces against the ink gripping him and pierced into the wall.

He extends his right arm.

Dahee and Jimin are both held back by Junhyun, but also kept away by the large raven. Splatters of ink drop on the ground, staining the fabrics and furniture.

The staccato rumbles in Taehyung's chest where his heart hammers. He can feel the way the ink tries to restrain the motion of his hand, but he's stronger. More frenzied. He manages to curl his middle finger so that it is bent against his thumb.

The view in front of him bleeds with the one of the nightmare, the pristine beige walls merging with moldy, worn out stones. Jungkook and Jimin’s yells are drowned by the sounds of rattling chains and of something breaking.

Taehyung’s fingers shake from the strength he has to exert to maintain his arm up. A transparent, minuscule bead of rippling arcane forms between his middle finger and thumb, the shapes undulating where it is held. He aims at the warlock.

“Yoongi, let him—”

Taehyung flicks the bead.

Everything has happened quickly, perhaps in the matter of ten seconds, yet it feels impossibly drawn out as Taehyung watches the pearl whiz past Yoongi's shoulder.

Silence floats.

The bead pierces through concrete like cotton.

The wall, ground and windows, along with half of the room, implode and shatter to pieces.

A gust of air throws everyone off their feet, sending them to topple backward amidst the flurry of splinters and blasted furniture flying in every direction. The raven ruptures into a rain of black ink that pours over what's left of the area.

Taehyung's bindings relax around him when the warlock is hurled to the other side of the meeting room. Taehyung is surprised to see that the man is unharmed, arm still attached to his body.

Yoongi rises to his feet. "I'll fucking kill you." He gathers every drop of ink that has fallen in the room, even collecting those absorbed by the clothes or sofas' fabric. The ink swirls in the warlock's hand, drawing sharp angles and an elongated baton.

The halberd Yoongi holds is meager compared to the second bead of force Taehyung is creating. Taehyung ignores the tiredness that weighs him after the first one, having not used his arcane to such an extent in a while.

Jimin moves as the warlock draws back his arm. Taehyung prepares himself to flick the second pearl. However Jimin snatches Yoongi by the vest to swivel him around, his fist raising, about to smash across the warlock's face.

The ink tightens anew on Taehyung's limbs.

"Are you sure they'll be enough? They look so flimsy."

"The warlock said they would be."

"What if he breaks free though?"

"Stop!" Jungkook pushes Yoongi away from Jimin, breaking the two and unknowingly saving his friend's life

"See?"

"I was scared he'd get out after we got the job done."

“Gather everything and put them in the pouches and cases. We’ll…”

“What is wrong with you?!”

“What is wrong with *me?!* He hurt you and—”

“He hasn’t done anything!”

“Your throat—”

“Seungwon did this to me! Not Taehyung!”

“How long until next time?”

“The warlock said they should be back tomorrow. In 20, 24 hours.”

“Thank fuck. I thought it’d take hours only. I need to clean up.”

“Nah. Because of the cuffs, his arcane…”

There’s a ringing between Taehyung’s ears. Or perhaps it’s the voices, blaring and incessant. He thinks he can smell the putrid mint and coal, but he knows it’s in his imagination.

It has to be, right?

“But—”

“But nothing! I hid them yesterday after stumbling on Seungwon because I wasn’t about to show up with those bruises to greet the guests,” Jungkook exclaims.

“Fuck,” Taehyung exhales, shaky. “Let me go."

It sounds too much like a plea. *He hates it.*

The chains — *ink?* — constricting Taehyung’s body vanish.

He staggers forward, his vision blurry. He hears some sound on his left, footsteps or hitting and he shuffles away from it and the yelling. His legs are weak though, barely carrying him to the other side of the room where the cleaved hole of the crumbled floor, wall and ceiling are.

Taehyung falls on his knees, facing the garden three floors below him. There's a crater where the bead had continued its path of destruction.

His skin prickles from having his back to the room. *Vulnerable*. And so he drops down, not that he could stay up with his limbs that give in under his own weight. His head dangling from the edge of the torn floor. Voices blend together in his head, unable to extricate the one of his parents and Jimin from those of the man with the scent or more.

He only realizes now how his breath has picked up, erratic and irregular. He's trying to breathe, to send air into his burning lungs, but he can’t, not with the way his heart feels like it's being ripped out of his chest.

He doesn’t want to be back there again.

I have to get out.

He can’t figure out where he is anymore.

I can't do this again.

If he’s safe or not. If he’s back there or not.

There’s some blue above him but he doesn’t know what it is. He swears he can sense some metal on his wrists and ankles. Some tugging. His scars hurt. His head hurts. Everything does.

"F—Fuck.” A sob catches in his throat.

Taehyung wonders if he’s having a heart attack, if he's about to die from it.

His face is cupped.

He can’t flinch away, his body paralyzed. The hands cradling his cheeks emanate a warmth as they turn his head to the side.

Taehyung doesn’t recognize who the person is, and the alarm swells.

“You’re safe,” the person says.

Taehyung blinks, his vision clearing enough to see Jimin.

“You’re safe, Taehyung.”

“Don’t wanna—” Taehyung's respiration is too labored. His eyes close. “Not back there.”

“You’re at Amaris’ citadel. You’re not in the room. You’re not with them again. You got married yesterday. With Jungkook,” Jimin says, his voice assured, piercing through the fog swallowing Taehyung’s thoughts. “Focus on breathing. Remember to count. It's real, you're with us.”

Taehyung nods, clinging onto Jimin’s words and voice, but Taehyung is struggling to entangle the reality from the illusory.

Something trickles down his temple and disappears in his hair. He believes he can feel a fresh breeze brush over his skin. More talking erupts. They're different from Jimin. One of them sounds like the man with scent. Jimin's face is gone, and maybe this isn't real at all. Maybe he *is* back in the room and they're about to—

A cold object bumps against his shoulder.

He wonders if it’s one of those damp walls he would lean against. However the object moves. It’s smaller than a wall, and it’s long, stretching endlessly. It touches his cheek. Taehyung sees some blurred spot of red seconds later, mingling with black and the blue above him.

A tissue grazes his temples as he blinks away the blurriness in his eyes. He notes the sleeve leading to a hand wearing a ring. A storm churns in the ring's diamond.

“Can you see me?” Someone says, and akin to before, a hand gently wipes his eyes. There’s a rhythmic tapping of a finger on the back of his hand. “Can you see her too?” Taehyung peers at the two faces above him. “You know who I am, right? I’m Jungkook, your lovely husband. And this Revna."

What if even this isn’t real? What if Jungkook isn't?

“Imagination can be pretty extravagant, but even it wouldn’t be able to come up with a man who has a basilisk guardian angel and a miniature storm in his wedding ring. I’m sure you never saw my face or Revna’s in your dreams back then because you didn’t know us. Because the time you were in that room is in the past. You aren’t there anymore.”

Taehyung’s chest heaves with the effort to regulate his breathing. The tapping on his hand doesn’t stop, an anchor he uses to count up to ten.

“You’re in the present right now, with us. With me. None of this is a dream, yes?”

Taehyung's heart does not hurt as much anymore, so manages to nod this time. He's rewarded with a hand that softly card through his hair, pushing his bang away from his forehead.

“What can you hear?”

Taehyung doesn’t understand the question. Faint clicks of metal knocking against metal flare near his right ear as a hand — *Jungkook's* — cups the side of Taehyung's head.

“What can you hear, Taehyung?”

Some boom floats next to Taehyung. It’s distant, so quiet that he thinks it may be another trick of his mind, however the sound deepens as the rumble is broken by a snap.

“Thunder,” Taehyung croaks out as something cold moves then rests atop his wrist.

“Exactly. It’s from the storm in the ring. I noticed I could hear it last night.”

Taehyung hears another voice, of a woman this time, and she mentions something about arcane Taehyung doesn’t pay any attention to.

“It’s your arcane in it. Your wind, fire and lightning,” Jungkook resumes. “It’s your storm. You made it yesterday.”

Taehyung had not been capable of using his breaths in the room. But if he had summoned his arcane yesterday then...

Then he’s not back there.

It makes sense, right?

It’s real. It *has* to be. Because Jungkook is right, Taehyung’s mind couldn’t have made him and the basilisk up.

So Taehyung focuses on those: on the tapping, the numbers and the thunder. On a human to get away from those that have hurt him, and on the basilisk tucked alongside his arm.

Soon, Taehyung can pick up on Jimin and his parents' scents. It’s familiar. *It’s home.* When he concentrates on the ring, he *can* feel his breaths seeping from it. Arcane swirl in his breath pouch, free.

The overwhelming weight that a calamity is about to occur lessens until it completely vanishes. His respiration regulates and evens out. He brings forth his fire breath, letting it climb up his throat, and when he opens his eyes, some flames flick out of it.

The hand on the side of his head and the smooth coldness leave him, replaced by the face of his mother sitting next to him and holding his face.

“My son, you are home, and safe.”

“Fuck,” Taehyung eloquently replies. He had woken up perhaps an hour ago, and he could fall asleep all over again at any moment now.

Taehyung sits up with his mother and Jimin’s help. At his mother's instruction, he straightens his legs on the floor, his arms limp between them. His hair is damp, drops falling on his pants and more sliding down his neck and face. A cloth is passed on his forehead. He's too numb to bat it away.

The humiliation isn’t there yet.

It might flare later, but he’s not so certain. All that matters at the moment is that he isn’t in the roo.

“One of you should shift to bring a carriage up here so he can directly climb in it and leave,” Jungkook proposes, even if it sounds more like a demand.

“I will fetch one from the front,” Junhyun coldly agrees.

It’s silent for a while.

Taehyung grows more conscious of his body, enough for him to grab the hem of his shirt and wipe the sweat covering his face. He then rubs the heel of his palms on his eyes, white dots appearing under his closed lids.

He wants to be back in Vanae.

“Your father is here,” Dahee announces after a while. “We can leave.”

Taehyung tries to stand but his legs are too wobbly, so he waits for a little longer. No one tries to help him. They know better not to. Jungkook appears to know as well from where he’s standing feet away, right between Taehyung and the warlock.

It’s at the second trial that Taehyung stands. He combs a hand through his hair, slicking his bang across his crown. His thoughts flicker back to how a foreign hand had done the same earlier.

“Taehyung, I’m—”

To Taehyung’s surprise, neither his parents nor Jimin are the one to interrupt Yoongi.

It’s Jungkook, who levels the warlock with a glacial stare. “Don’t. You’ve done enough.”

Yoongi looks positively chastised at this, his lips pinched together and his gaze cast low.

Taehyung doesn’t have the energy to revel in it. He ignores the warlock in favor of turning around. His father is in his dragon form, the latter flying closer to the torn wall with the carriage attached at his talon.

The breeze is refreshing on Taehyung’s heated skin.

When the carriage is close enough, Jimin opens the door, climbing inside, Dahee next. Taehyung is about to do the same, however he glances at Jungkook over his shoulder.

“I’ll ride with Joon and Yoongi, so I’ll meet you later in Vanae.” Jungkook doesn’t sound thrilled by his own admission.

Taehyung ponders for a brief lull. “You can come in,” he rasps and turns to step inside the carriage.

“It’s alright, I’ll—”

“You can go with them,” Yoongi says. “Namjoon and I will travel the regular way since we have to bring what’s left of our belongings to the house we found in Vanae. We’ll have to speak to the Queen and King about this as well.” He motions toward the destroyed room.

“Fine. I’m still angry at you, but I love you,” Jungkook huffs and hugs Yoongi.

“I love you too.” Yoongi parts away from Jungkook. His gaze flits on the transportation vessel, meeting Taehyung’s. “I’m sorry. I thought... I'm sorry.” He swivels on his feet and wordlessly exits the room.

Namjoon draws a contrite smile. “I’ll talk to him.” He pats Jungkook’s shoulder then runs after the warlock.

Jungkook makes his way toward the others. He settles on Taehyung’s right, Dahee and Jimin in front of them.

The ride is quiet for the most part.

The window is opened on Taehyung's side, and he props an arm on the frame, chin tucked in his palm. He observes his mother and Jimin, the latter fast asleep, his head on Dahee’s lap. Taehyung smiles. Dahee mirrors him when she catches his gaze.

Some lingering restlessness subsists in Taehyung but it’s mild, abated the longer he’s in the sky.

Irregular ticks keep flicking in the carriage. Taehyung pays it no heed at first, however when it still hasn't stopped minutes later, his head snaps toward Jungkook who’s clicking his nails together. “What.”

“Huh?”

“If you’ve got something to say then say it,” Taehyung snaps.

“Oh it’s—” Jungkook’s fingers pause. “It’s nothing important. It’s not my business.”

“And?”

After a beat, Jungkook says “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“If I’m overstepping or anything like that, you can tell me to fuck off and I will.”

“Just ask already.”

“What prompted your… Your reaction?”

Taehyung stills.

The confession is easier to utter than he had anticipated, but he guesses that it can be another tenth of a token he can offer to Jungkook.

“The ink’s bindings.”

“Oh.” Jungkook looks pensive. “Okay. I see. I had a feeling but I wasn’t sure.” He halts to peer down at his entangled hands, his thumb rubbing back and forth over the other. “When I wrap my hand or arm around one of yours, is that okay? Because if it feels constricting like a binding, I can stop.”

Taehyung can only stare at the Prince, his gaze locked with Jungkook’s candid one.

He can’t remember the last time someone other than his family has ever shown such attentive — and undeserved — care. He doesn’t know how to feel about it either: if he’s content, annoyed or upset. His mind is too much of a blustery storm, and so he chooses a simple answer.

“It’s fine.”

“Okay.” Jungkook's lips tug around a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Why,” Taehyung huffs.

Jungkook gives Taehyung a pointed look. “I told you in the restroom already. Thank you for being honest, O emotionally constipated prick.”

“Fucking brat,” Taehyung retorts but it’s lacking its usual bite.

Dahee chuckles, echoed by Jimin.

Taehyung leans away from the window. He folds his arms over his chest and he slumps down his seat to drop his head against the backrest, finding it harder and harder to keep his eyes open.

He eventually gives up, lulled by the slight sway of the carriage.

Taehyung wakes up on a cushiony, large couch in his parents' home.

He has no clue on how he has gotten there, if he has walked or not, or if he, Elders forbid, has been *carried* like a damn child.

The living room is warm, the burning fireplace casting a golden hue over the place. Candles are lit as well, maintaining a consistent glow against the complete darkness of the night.

Taehyung is well rested in spite of his fright attack. It has happened, he has handled it — with some help —, and it has passed. He muses about what his family, especially what his father, would always say whenever it would occur, about how there's nothing to be ashamed of. However Taehyung can still sometimes feel the creeping tendrils of humiliation crawling across his skin.

Tonight, however, he feels good. No shame or fear lingers. He's at home and warm. H *e's safe,* he tells himself as a mantra.

Some hushed voices elevate from the kitchen behind the couch.

"Thank you for your help earlier, Jungkook," Dahee says.

"Nothing to thank me for."

"They happen rarely now, but when they do, it can sometimes be difficult to know what to do to aid him," Dahee carries on. "However, you promptly understood what had to be done and said. I admire your intelligence, my dear."

"Ah, I'm—" Jungkook pauses.

Taehyung can nearly hear the blush that must take over the Prince's face.

"It's just… I don't know. Instincts. I guess I'm not too bad at understanding him? And to be completely honest with you, Taehyung himself should be thanked. I stole the thunder idea from him. I wasn't feeling well the night before, but he was thankfully there and had done something similar."

"Is this why I could smell petrichor when we arrived this morning?"

"He created a storm to help me."

A moment of silence expands in the discussion.

"Taehyung created a storm to help you."

Taehyung frowns.

Why does his mother sound so exasperated?

Jungkook must share Taehyung's confusion because he says "Yes, he did. Why? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Dahee groans. “These boys…"

Taehyung peers at the flames as another lull floats in the living room, a heavy blanket draped over him. He should probably make his awakening known before the discussion starts again, but he’s comfortable where he is, not in the mood to chat or move a single limb.

“He said to me that he never told you about what happened to him,” Jungkook starts after a while. “That he never allowed you to visit him when he came back.”

“He never has. Only my father truly knows. Minsoo is a dragonborn with healing and nature related breaths. He helped take care of Taehyung during his convalescence.”

“Have you ever asked him?”

“All the time, at first. I was blinded by my wrath and would relentlessly ask. Then he snapped at me one day. I wanted to hunt and raze from this world those that had hurt my son, but Taehyung was— He wanted to heal. I respected his decision.”

“I see..."

“I believe he also wanted to protect us, especially Jimin. When Taehyung had been gone, Jimin had been… absent. The shadow of who he had once been. He would spend his nights and days looking for Taehyung, while forgetting to look after himself. It was a heartbreaking sight. Taehyung got to know about this. He must have judged it too risky for us or Jimin to truly know the extent of what he'd gone through. Jimin would have most likely gone on a rampage.”

“That sounds like something Jimin would do.”

Dahee chuckles. “I would have certainly joined him, while Junhyun would have tried to fruitlessly temper us. Jimin and I can be the wind to each other’s fire.”

Taehyung huffs a quiet chuckle at the understatement.

“Minsoo never told you about Taehyung either?”

“It isn’t his place to do so. All my mate, Jimin and I knew at the time and still to this day is that Taehyung had narrowly escaped death. He had been brought to us in a critical state, and had remained at death’s door for 17 days before he was deemed to be stable.”

“God… That must have been terrifying.”

“It was a ghastly time. It was hard on everyone but none of us ever said anything, but Taehyung was the one suffering. However Taehyung’s pain had become ours as well, and it had been difficult to handle.” Dahee pauses, the clanging of a cup being rested on a table following suit. “I recall being unable to sleep until I passed out. I couldn’t bear the idea of losing my son again, of him being hurt once more. I had to be vigilant and alert at all times, or at least I thought I had to for months.”

Taehyung had never known this. He had been so wrapped up in himself back then that he had never stopped to think about how his family may have felt after the nightmare.

“I’d be thinking the same as well after an event like that."

“Thankfully, Junhyun was there. Jimin and I could rely on him.” The smile is audible in Dahee's voice. “Taehyung has simply... refused to share this burden with us.”

“Hopefully he does one day.”

Taehyung swallows around the swelling lump in his throat.

“Hopefully. Nevertheless everything is well, now. Taehyung is safe, and that is all that matters. You should head to bed, dear,” Dahee says after some amicable quietude. “It is late.”

“I will.” Sounds of chairs echo in the kitchen. “Thank you for letting me sleep here.”

“It is no trouble. We are always happy to have you with us. You’re welcome in our home, Jungkook.”

There’s no noise for a while and, curious, Taehyung peeps from above the couch to watch his mother hugging Jungkook. He meets Dahee’s gaze who doesn’t appear surprised to see him awake.

Taehyung falls back on the couch and waits.

“Goodnight."

“Goodnight, my dear.”

Taehyung listens to the padded footsteps of his mother walking inside the living room. She sits on the edge of the sofa, peering down at Taehyung.

“I raised you better than to spy on people.”

“You did not,” Taehyung retorts. “I still remember that time when I was a kid where you quite literally threw me on a rooftop to listen in on a group’s conversation.”

Dahee snorts and tilts her chin away as she crosses her arms. “I had to know whether or not they had been yapping behind my back, and they *had* been.”

Taehyung laughs. He closes his eyes when his mother cards her hand through his hair. The motion is different from when he had his fright attack this morning. The tenderness in it had been more tentative, more uncertain yet just as soothing.

Taehyung senses more than he hears his father joining them downstairs, Junhyun’s scent always accompanied by a vanilla tinge to it.

“My loves,” Junhyun mumbles through a yawn. “Why are you both still awake? I was wondering when you would join me in bed, Darling.”

“Night owls,” Taehyung and Dahee both say in unison.

Junhyun chuckles as he settles on the armchair poised next to the couch. “How are you faring, my son?”

“I’m good."

“Yes?” Dahee probes and folds her hands over her lap.

“Yeah.”

A smile that Taehyung can only qualify as teasing curls his mother’s lips. “Jungkook is quite marvelous, isn’t he?”

“He certainly helped a lot, Revna as well,” Junhyun agrees with an equally playful smile.

Taehyung huffs. “Sure.” Dahee pinches him and Taehyung would pinch her back if it didn’t mean leaving the warm cocoon he’s wrapped into.

His parents chat together for a bit.

Taehyung watches them.

It’s been six years.

Six years of refusing to give away a sliver of his burden, instead carrying it all by himself. If what had occurred to him still mangles his mind to this day, he wonders if it still is the same for his parents. He wonders if they wake up in cold sweat in the middle of the night, fearing that what had been done to Taehyung may happen again without even *knowing* what has truly gone down.

Taehyung sits up, the blanket pooling on his lap where his hands fold. He leans against the couch’s armrest behind him, and an anxious turmoil rises in him.

Junhyun shuffles the armchair he’s sitting on to be closer to the sofa. “Taehyung?”

“What is troubling your mind?”

Taehyung opens his mouth, but nothing comes out of it.

The lump from minutes earlier is back, tight and compressing his chest. His hands grip onto the blanket. Junhyun’s hands wrap around Taehyung’s fist, unfolding the fingers to hold Taehyung's hand.

Taehyung exhales, his gaze darting between his parents.

Memories of parents' faces stricken by sorrow flicker in his head.

“You should talk about it, it’s freeing.”

Taehyung is exhausted. He is so, *so tired.*

So he talks.

He tells his parents of the nightmare. Of the pain and the fury, of the fear and humiliation. He does not tell them all. The gruesome details are only for him to know. However enough for them to know: from beginning to end, from capture to freedom, from giving up to fighting back.

He does not stop because if he does he'll never be able to continue again. Taehyung speaks and speaks and *speaks*, even as his voice grows hoarse with the sobs he tries to repress but can't. Even as tears slide down his mother and father's cheeks. Dahee and Junhyun are quiet, attentively listening to him and patiently waiting when he has to collect himself and find his voice again.

When he's done, Dahee's arms wrap around Taehyung in a tight embrace that he reciprocates, muffling his cries on his mother's shoulder. He feels his father's palm rub between his shoulder blades, the soreness soothed.

Taehyung hadn't expected for the relief to be so dizzying after speaking about his nightmare. He feels lighter, like the stone that has been weighing in his chest since that forsaken day is beginning to finally lift and allow him to breathe easier.

The three of them remain in the living room for a while afterwards, hugging and watching the fireplace. They spend the rest of the night in silence, Taehyung with his head on his father's shoulder, drinking the cups of soothing tea Dahee prepares for them.

"You look like shit," Jimin greets Taehyung when the latter makes the mistake of stepping a foot in the dining area.

"At least it's an exceptional occurrence unlike some," Taehyung retorts and kicks Jimin's rear after Jimin has done the same to him.

"You're alright?"

Taehyung draws a little smile. "Yeah." He won't tell Jimin just yet. His friend is too impulsive, and with the man with the scent having shown up at the wedding, Taehyung doesn't want to risk anything.

Everyone is seated at the dining table. Taehyung plops down on the empty seat between the Prince and Jimin. They seem to have eaten their breakfast already except for Taehyung who wolfs down his scrambled eggs.

"What were you talking about?" Taehyung asks amidst two bites.

"Seungwon," Jungkook answers. The basilisk is laid on his lap, eating the pieces of cooked boar he's sharing with her, her head hovering above the plate.

"Now why would you subject yourself to that?"

"Do you remember when we saw them in the forest?" Jungkook starts and Taehyung nods. "The Jaehee man took out a sundial with runes on it, and I think they have a tracking spell on me and are using the sundial to pinpoint my location. They knew we left the house, then they said that it was 'dwindling'."

"That'd explain why the pig was at the wedding," Jimin adds. "To put it back on you."

“I’ve been thinking the same,” Jungkook agrees. “He most likely succeeded. I think Jaehee said he or someone else could put it on me, and Seungwon touched me.”

“How has the spell gotten on you the first time?” Dahee inquires.

Jungkook sighs. “I’m not sure.”

Taehyung is hit by a realization.

If the tracker can be put on anyone by anyone, then—

Taehyung slams his fist on the table. “I fucking knew it. Woobin," he says to Jungkook. “Remember the ‘rite of passage’ when you first arrived here?” Jungkook’s mouth parts open. “Woobin touched your shoulder, and over a month has passed between this and us stumbling on Seungwon in the forest, which would explain why the tracker is dwindling.”

“Oh my God.”

Taehyung clicks his tongue. “I knew something was off, but I didn’t think there was any actual purpose behind it aside from Woobin being a piece of shit.”

“I need to speak with Yoongi about it. He and Namjoon arrived at their house in Vanae.”

“You can bring them here,” Taehyung offers. It’s not like he can forever ignore the warlock’s existence, plus Yoongi could prove himself to be useful. “We should talk about this with him anyway.”

Jungkook appears uncertain. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it's fine. If he tries anything again, I'll aim for the head next time."

“Prick,” Jungkook says with a misplaced laugh. He stands, leaving the basilisk on his chair. “I’ll get him now, I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll fly you there, it’ll be faster and will take only a few minutes,” Jimin proposes and rises to his feet.

“Is it okay if I leave her here?” Jungkook motions toward the basilisk.

“Of course,” Junhyun grins.

Jungkook and Jimin both make their way toward the entrance door and exit the house.

Jimin turns and the two of them fly off, disappearing in the sky.

Taehyung resumes his breakfast.

There’s a gaze on him. Not Jungkook's for once.

Two red, inquisitive eyes to be more precise. He ignores it at first but he eventually caves and glares down at the basilisk still staring up at him. She lifts her head, her elongated neck and body stretching toward Taehyung to curl over his arm. She doesn’t need any verbose to communicate her intentions as she sniffs at the plate.

“No. Move.” Taehyung pushes the basilisk’s head while tugging the plate away from her. He continues his meal, however minutes later, the snake’s black head adorned with the white sigil peeks out from underneath Taehyung’s arm. “What did I just say?”

The basilisk hisses at him, her tongue darting out. She bumps her snout against his forearm and she curls around it a couple times to rest her head atop Taehyung’s hand. Then, she tilts her head and watches him with her big, round eyes.

“You can try to guilt trip me all you want but it won’t work. Stop it and get off of me.”

Taehyung is a stubborn, hard-headed man.

He does not give in to pouts, sad noises or any act of that kind — because the basilisk’s behavior is undeniably an act, certainly a trait she has inherited from the bratty Prince. So, when Taehyung refuses to grant something to someone, it is, for the most part, resolute. *Final.* Even for the damn snake.

Taehyung *swears* that he is a stubborn, hard-headed man.

He truly is.

Which is why his plate is on the floor a brief while later, the leftovers of his breakfast now begrudgingly given to the basilisk who chirps a series of happy clicks.

Taehyung grumbles under his breath as he does the dishes. His parents snicker behind him. “Stop laughing.”

“What’s going on?” Jimin wonders as he enters the house.

“Nothing aside from Taehyung being adorably biased,” Dahee answers.

“Mom,” Taehyung snips and turns.

Jungkook is stepping inside, the warlock and Namjoon trailing behind. Taehyung and the warlock’s eyes meet. Taehyung rejoices in the way Yoongi is the first to avert his gaze seconds later.

“Shall we settle down somewhere more comfortable?” Junhyun proposes.

The group fills the living room's couches and armchairs while the basilisk spreads out in front of the fireplace.

Taehyung’s attention is called by a familiar ring of ink the warlock presents to the room.

“We can use this to verify if you have a tracking spell or not. I’ve tweaked it to be more specific and detailed in what it finds,” Yoongi explains and gives the ring to Jungkook

After removing the wedding necklace along with the ruby one, Jungkook walks inside the kitchen. “It shouldn’t detect anyone else’s arcane if I’m that far?”

Yoongi nods. “I reduced the scanning area to three feet around the ring.”

“Alright.” Jungkook presses on the gem while Yoongi opens the notebook he has been holding.

“This is quite the fascinating arcane you have, Yoongi,” Junhyun marvels.

Yoongi draws a small smile. “Thank you. The possibilities with my arcane and ink are quite extensive, it—” He freezes on his spot and springs up. “Fuck.”

Taehyung straightens from his slouched position.

Half of the room erupts in a *‘What is it?’*

Yoongi produces a raven that hovers in front of him. “Find the location,” he commands and the raven flies toward Jungkook.

It scrutinizes Jungkook, darting this and that way to sniff at this or that spot. It halts near Jungkook’s neck. Yoongi marches toward him and yanks on the cotton shirt. He murmurs something under his breath as ink swirls out of his fingers. Then, he touches Jungkook’s skin with his ink, at the joint of the neck and shoulder.

A round circle appears. It’s faint and barely noticeable, but it’s there.

“This— This is my tracker.”

“*What?*” Everyone collectively says.

Taehyung surveys the warlock. “You said someone ordered a tracker from you some time ago.”

Yoongi glances at Taehyung. “A certain Kang Minho did.”

“Fuckers," Taehyung hisses. "They used Woobin's friend to commission the tracker in case you knew Woobin’s name.”

“I swear I had *no idea,* Jungkook, I would never—”

“Yoongi, I know,” Jungkook frowns and squeezes Yoongi’s arm. “It wasn't your fault.”

“How does your tracker work?” Dahee questions, her tone clipped. She still clearly holds a grudge against the warlock, and Taehyung bites back a snicker at his mother’s fierce protectiveness.

“It’s made with an ink that turns invisible after a few seconds. All that has to be done is stick the patch of ink somewhere on someone’s body or clothes. The patch works like a miniature sun, to put it simply,” Yoongi explains while seemingly removing the tracker from Jungkook. “It comes with a —”

“Sundial,” Taehyung and Jungkook both say.

“Yes."

No one speaks a word for a moment.

“Small word, isn’t it?” Jimin snorts. “I personally find that a little amusing.”

Yoongi sighs heavily. “I’m sorry. This shouldn’t have happened. My clientele comes from all sort of backgrounds and so I tend to rarely ask questions as long as they pay me, but if I—”

“You couldn’t have known, Yoon, it’s okay,” Jungkook shushes. “Let’s sit down." He pushes on his friend’s back, the two of them settling back on the couch. “Do I have a second tracker on me?” He inquires and fastens back the necklaces.

“There’s an unknown arcane on you. Not ancient, simply well hidden, so it could be it.” Yoongi reads the book, tilting it away from any prying eyes. “Whoever put it on you is skilled. I don’t think I’ll be able to decipher it since the ring would have done it. I also won’t be able to remove it.”

“Then we—”

“This isn’t what bothers me, though.” Yoongi shows the book to Namjoon and Jungkook. “We never really spoke about that.”

“You were right," Jungkook says and peers at Taehyung, "they aren’t yours.”

Taehyung assumes Jungkook is referring to the additional two ancient arcanes the ring had found back when Taehyung had commissioned Yoongi.

“But…" Jungkook trails off. "That doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?” Jimin pipes up. “What’s all the secrecy about?”

“God.” Jungkook rubs his palms over his face then plays with the hoops framing his ear. “I guess I should—”

“You don’t have to,” Namjoon interjects. “It could put you in danger. The more the amount of people aware of this grows, the riskier it becomes.”

“I know, but it’s better if they know, and I trust them. Taehyung already knows, and I’ve been thinking about telling Dahee, Junhyun and Jimin as well. I’m just worried. I intended to tell them eventually, however not so soon.”

“Now,” Jimin begins, the smile curving his lips not reaching his eyes, “what the *fuck* is going on?”

Namjoon startles when Jungkook slams the notebook shut. Taehyung peers at the Prince, and he can tell the latter has made his decision.

Jungkook, similar to when he had shown Taehyung, tugs the sleeves of his pullover up to his elbows. The basilisk slithers toward him, finding her home around his shoulders. Jungkook’s lids fall shut, and Taehyung watches the tattoos spread over Jungkook’s skin.

When Jungkook’s eyes open, they’re fully black. “I’m—”

“You’re a warlock!” Jimin springs up. “I knew all the arcanes Taehyung found with the ring couldn’t have only been about the basilisk or an object! I fucking knew it,” he exclaims and wiggles his finger between Taehyung and Jungkook as he burst into a maniacal laughter.

Dahee and Junhyun, on the other hand, are gawking at Jungkook, their mouths part open and eyes widened.

“Uhm... Yes, anyway.” Jungkook clears his throat and turns away from a hysterical Jimin to regard Taehyung’s parents. “I’m a warlock, as Jimin pointed out. I’m not just any warlock. I’m a necromancer.”

Jimin sobers up at this addition. “A what?”

“A necromancer. I can speak with the dead and help their souls pass. I don’t really want to go into too much detail, as they aren’t that important anyway, but this is what Taehyung had figured out and kept from you,” Jungkook reveals, and his gaze looks thankful when he looks at Taehyung.

Taehyung shrugs it off.

This secret had never been his to share.

Dahee, Junhyun and Jimin take the revelation a lot better than Taehyung had at the time.

Jimin plops down on his chair and fires a plethora of questions at the Prince who tries to answer some of them but gives up after the twentieth one. Meanwhile Taehyung’s parents mention their evident surprise — and awed interest, in Junhyun’s case. Dahee and Junhyun don’t seem put off or scared, and Jungkook's shoulders relax around a heavy sigh minutes later.

Dahee eventually shushes Jimin with a minuscule fireball aimed at his forehead.

“I know you have a lot more questions, but I don’t want to answer them all for the moment.” Jungkook's tattoos have withdrawn along with the black in his eyes.

“It is more than alright, Jungkook,” Junhyun smiles. “We’re simply… taken aback. I had never even thought that you could be more than a human.”

Dahee is eerily mute. She has this look on her face, mulling and calculating. Her gaze meets Taehyung’s. They don’t need to speak for Taehyung to know his mother has drawn similar conclusions to his: Jungkook could potentially aid in elucidating the plague, if the Elders allow it.

A quarter of an hour later, and once everyone’s — mainly Jimin’s — freak out has passed, Namjoon speaks.

“Yoongi, is your ring defective?” Namjoon asks, reading the notebook.

“No, it isn’t.”

“What is wrong?” Dahee wonders.

Jungkook retrieves the book from his friend to show the pages to Dahee, Junhyun and Jimin. “As you can see, there are several ancient arcanes detected. One of them is the one I currently have: necromancy. So the ability to speak with the dead and help souls pass, but here it says that there are two additional ancient arcanes. That *I* have two more. But I technically don’t.”

“You clearly have more than one,” Taehyung unhelpfully supplies.

“Well observed, detective,” Jimin sasses with a kick on Taehyung’s shin.

“The Arcane works in wondrous ways,” Junhyun brightens, who nurses the same fondness and fascination for arcanes as much as Taehyung does. “Your necromancy must be more complex than what you believe. The other two types found by the ring may be subcategories of necromancy.”

“That’d make sense,” Taehyung hums. “Arcanes have always been a spectrum.”

“Exactly, my son,” Junhyun agrees with a pride that warms Taehyung’s cheeks.

“How so?” Namjoon wonders, and Taehyung throws him a stony look. “Sorry. I’m not really familiar with dragonborns or warlocks’ arcane. I’ve only seen Yoongi’s.”

“For example, my grandfather has an arcane related to nature: a breath that allows him to enhance the properties of any kind of plant, flower and so on,” Taehyung explains, “but this is one among the umbrella of other types of nature arcanes that exist. Some dragonborns can breathe leaves, cherry blossom petals or vines. While others have a breath that can heal plants or help them grow. It’s endless, and it must be similar for necromancy, albeit with a more restricted pool. If we take into account the fact that necromancy is an expunged, ancient arcane, the diversity in its subcategories must be much, *much* more narrow. Where nature related arcanes have dozens of thousands of different subcategories, necromancy may have only a few dozen at most."

“You’re not even discreet. Have some decency,” Namjoon chides.

Taehyung's gaze snaps from the floor to bore onto Namjoon, thinking that the odd remark is directed at him. However he promptly realizes that it's aimed at Jungkook who’s unabashedly staring at Taehyung.

Taehyung's family laughs, for some reason.

There’s an aspect in Jungkook's gaze, in how he’s not even *blinking,* that unnerves Taehyung. Jungkook looks enthralled, for lack of a better word? Although Taehyung hasn’t done anything that warrants this, but then again, he *is* quite the incredible dragonborn.

Namjoon elbows Jungkook in the ribs. “Aurora to Jungkook.”

Jungkook jolts on his seat. His head darts to the right. “Hm?”

Yoongi snorts. “You’re a mess, kid.”

“Says you,” Jungkook retorts.

“Either way, this is what the other ancient arcanes could be,” Taehyung says, discarding whatever the hell happened.

“It could be, I suppose?” Jungkook ponders. “But I’ve never manifested anything else aside from the two skills I currently have.”

“We’ve always seen your arcane as one single entity, but perhaps your ability to speak with a soul and help them pass are separated.”

“I was thinking the same,” Taehyung nods. “It’s two entirely different processes. Plus you’ve got three sigils. The one on your throat is obviously to communicate with the dead, and maybe the one on your left or right hand is to help them pass.”

“That still leaves an unknown arcane,” Yoongi points out.

“And your precious ring can’t figure this out?”

“No.” The animosity Yoongi had once shown for Taehyung flashes to life again. “It’s too ancient.”

“Hoseok and Jin could help,” Jimin proposes. All eyes drift on him. “Hoseok dabs a lot in everything that is forbidden, and he often visits Eden. If there’s a place where we can get answers, it’s there.”

“Eden?” Namjoon echoes.

“Whoever created this city had a great sense of humor,” Jimin shrugs. “Eden, but every single thing here is a forbidden fruit, and everyone is a sinner.”

Dahee places a hand on Taehyung’s wrist. “It could help us as well. You may find useful oddities to bring here.”

“And we could also look for information regarding the primordial stone,” Jungkook adds. “I still haven’t found anything about it.”

“Might be because you’ve been busy sketching nixes in your book,” Taehyung quips.

“And I wonder why, uh?” Jungkook shoots back with an arched brow. “Who ruined my most prized book? Let me think… I believe it might have been a certain prick I married who still hasn’t apologized for it. At least not verbally.”

Taehyung slumps down the armchair. “I apologized once to you. That’s my yearly quota.”

Jimin claps his hands once. “Lovebirds, flirting can wait.”

Taehyung zaps Jimin.

“What’s the battle plan?”

“Visit Hoseok and Jin, then hopefully acquire a door to the black market."

"Isn't it risky for Jungkook to go there with the other potential tracker?"

"Eden is underneath the Seven Isles, so if there's another tracker on him, it'll be as though Jungkook is visiting the markets there."

"Plus it doesn't really matter anymore at this point, and I'll be safe since eight other people will be with me," Jungkook assures.

"True."

“Junhyun and I won’t be able to come with you,” Dahee says with a sigh. “We will be occupied handling matters with Vanae and the Council.”

“That’s fine," Taehyung dismisses. "We’ll report back to you if we find anything useful.”

“I have to prepare a couple things beforehand. I’ll need your assistance." Yoongi peers at Namjoon.

Jimin crosses a leg over the other as he leans over the couch’s arm. “May I help? I excel at following instructions.” He flips the bird in Taehyung’s direction when the latter utters a *‘No you don’t’*.

Yoongi accepts after a beat.

Taehyung rolls his eyes then stands. “I guess I’ll visit Hoseok now."

Jungkook perks up. “Can I come with you?”

Taehyung shrugs and marches toward the exit door where his boots and cloak await him. Jungkook joins him. Once dressed up, they both exit the house, smacked by the glacial winter breeze.

“Have fun, lovebirds!”

Taehyung sends a trail of lightning somewhere in Jimin’s direction.

“My, my, my…”

Taehyung refrains himself from rolling his eyes. *Again.* “Can you help us or not?”

Hoseok is smug, a pompous smirk twisting his lips. “For a price.”

“Of course and for *no* price,” Seokjin intervenes and smacks the back of Hoseok’s head. “We’d love to help. Hoseok has a lot of contacts underground.”

“You two will need to buy some accessories to disguise yourself. Invest in cloaks with hoods. Maybe some masks as well for extra security. And bonus style points, Elders know you need them,” Hoseok adds with a judgmental glance in Taehyung’s direction.

“Fuck you.”

“Won’t our attire be a little strange then?” Jungkook worries.

“Nope. It’s nothing unusual down there. Rare are those who show their faces in Eden.”

“But you’ll get us there?”

“Yup." Hoseok pinches Seokjin. "You’ll come with us?”

“I don’t know if I can afford to. We’ve been quite busy lately, and I have a lot of catching up to do,” Seokjin muses.

“Buuut?” Hoseok draws out.

“But it’d be entertaining,” Seokjin grins.

“If you want to find anything related to ancient arcanes, Eden will have that. It's one of, if not the largest market. Illegal market,” Hoseok adds. “Make sure to bring a hefty amount of coins and gems.”

“We’ll be fine,” Taehyung assures.

“We’ll have to fly to the Seven Isles. There’s a secret passage there to access Eden, and then we’ll go from there.”

“Sounds simple,” Jungkook hums.

Hoseok lifts two fingers. “We can meet up in two days. I have a few people to speak with to prepare our arrival.”

“Two days is good. We’ll see you then.” Taehyung swivels around to walk outside.

“Thank you for your help,” Jungkook smiles.

“You’re my favorite one. I don’t like him,” Hoseok loudly whispers.

Taehyung flips Hoseok the bird over his shoulder as he leaves the shop, Jungkook following suit.

Unlike the first time they had visited Vanae’s market, today they’re stopped every few seconds by passersby who congratulate them, the news of the wedding ceremony having spread like wildfire.

Taehyung smiles at the people, accepting the gifts and accolades given to them.

“They’re so kind,” Jungkook chuckles, an arm looped around Taehyung’s.

“I know.” Taehyung doesn’t bother hiding his pride and contentment.

“They seem to love you a lot.”

“I’m just trying to do my best as their future leader.” Sometimes it feels like he isn’t doing well or enough *at all*, but he listens to his people and always does his damnedest to respond to their worries or requests.

“And it works,” Jungkook affirms. “You’re a great leader already.”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook, surprised that the admission isn’t trailed by a ‘prick’. Jungkook is peering at him, and when he smiles, Taehyung averts his gaze.

Taehyung thoughtlessly observes the ceremony’s headpieces he and Jungkook had decided to display on an end table in the living room. The Prince arrives in the kitchen and prepares his coffee mug along with his breakfast.

Taehyung squints at Jungkook, scrutinizing him.

“The fuck’s going on with you?” Taehyung ultimately asks a short moment later.

“Uh?” Jungkook utters, his eyes as puffy and half closed as they always are in the morning, hair a damned mess.

“You’re being weird,” Taehyung notes. It sounds childish to his ears.

Jungkook is the one to squint at Taehyung as he pours himself some coffee. “I got in the kitchen, what, five minutes ago, and I haven’t spoken a word.”

Or this is what Taehyung believes Jungkook says because the Prince’s reply is slurred and mumbled through pursed lips. “You’re acting weird.” Taehyung tilts the moka pot up straight, stopping Jungkook from overfilling his mug and dousing the kitchen counter.

“What is weird, exactly?”

Taehyung doesn’t know. But he *knows*. “Just answer me.”

The pot rattles when Jungkook places it on the kitchen counter. “Nothing is going on.”

“Something is.”

“No?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t care. Why ask?”

“‘Cause it’s weird. You’re weird. You’re planning something?”

“I swear nothing is going on?”

“Are you asking me?”

“No. I’m confirming, but you being so adamant about it is confusing me. I just woke up,” Jungkook complains and flops down on a stool. “What is up with *you?”*

“I’m peachy,” Taehyung snips. His annoyance grows the more Jungkook’s own irritation does. “And that doesn’t answer my question.”

Jungkook slams the jar of sugar on the table. A scowl etches his face from where he’s installed in front of Taehyung. The surprise that washes over his face is sudden, as if understanding has finally dawned on him.

It’s even weirder.

“Oh,” Jungkook breathes out. “Good morning.”

Or maybe it was all in Taehyung’s head?

Taehyung mulls over this. He surveys Jungkook whose irritation vanishes, and Taehyung’s fizzles out as well.

Hm…

Yeah, it must have been a trick of his mind, Taehyung concludes, and he relaxes while continuing his breakfast as if he hasn’t harassed Jungkook first thing in the morning.

Jungkook downright giggles as he twirls his coffee. “You’re something else.”

“Hah? ”

“You like routine, right?” Jungkook asks and Taehyung shrugs. “You clearly do.”

“And how would you know?”

“Because me forgetting to greet you with a ‘good morning’ for the first time since I moved here has disturbed you so much that it convinced you something was wrong with me.”

Taehyung pauses halfway through a bite, his cheeks bulging. “That’s not— This isn’t why—” He *sputters*. “Shut up. This wasn't about that. You were being weird.”

“Sure, sure.” Jungkook leaves his stool to move past Taehyung to lean over the counter, right next to Taehyung. “Sorry for forgetting to give you your ritual good morning, Sweetheart,” he croons with a tilt of his head. “I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Get off my face before I make it happen myself.”

Jungkook chuckles and sashays toward the living room.

They eat and drink their breakfast in companionable silence for the next half hour or so before Jimin barges inside the house, accompanied by Namjoon and the warlock.

“Good morning, lovebirds,” Jimin happily chirps.

“Morning!” Jungkook replies with equal enthusiasm.

Taehyung deposits his plate and cutlery in the sink. When Jungkook does too, Taehyung says “You do the dishes.”

“I’m not your maid."

“I cleaned the house yesterday. I’m not on dish duty on top of that.”

“If I’m the one cooking, yes you are, but if *you* are cooking, then I’ll be the one doing the dishes. This is fair."

“I hate it,” Taehyung argues like a child but he'd do anything to not clean the dishes. “I hate it so much I’d rather broom the house for an hour than wash a single cup.”

“I hate it too."

Taehyung thinks for a moment as he and Jungkook glare at each other. “A schedule.”

“What?”

“We make a schedule to determine who does what and when chores wise, so that it’s *fair,* Viper."

“Oh that’s a good idea, even if I’m not really fond of schedules.”

“You’re used to them I’m sure.”

“Exactly,” Jungkook says. “But I agree. This is the best option for us right now.”

“Great.” Taehyung rummages through a drawer to retrieve a piece of parchment, a quill and jar of ink. “You’re fine with a weekly one? We need to see if it works first.”

“Yes, that’s a good point.” Jungkook shuffles next to Taehyung, propping his elbows on the wooden surface.

And so Taehyung and Jungkook launch themselves into the making of their schedule.

They dispute every. Damn. *Point.*

And Taehyung suspects that Jungkook is purposefully arguing simply to piss off Taehyung. However they get there eventually after Taehyung steps his foot down with a *‘If you contest* one more time *without a single proper argument as to why you are protesting aside from the fact that you’re obviously trying to push me over my limit and have me burn your ass to a crisp because you’re a damn masochist, I will actually end you’*.

Jungkook bursts into laughter at the tirade, of course, because he's insane like that.

Nonetheless, they get it done and manage to jot down a weekly schedule along with some general ground rules.

“I think it’ll work out,” Jungkook says, peering at the piece of parchment pinned on one of the kitchen’s walls.

Before Taehyung can respond, a voice startles them both, their heads snapping toward the living room.

“Ah, young love,” Jimin sighs.

“We’ve been waiting, in case you both forgot our existence,” Namjoon taunts.

“Not ‘in case.’ They definitely did,” Yoongi laughs.

“I— Sorry, we were taken by this.” Jungkook points at the written schedule.

“Well," Namjoon begins, "at least for once you're taken by an inanimate object rather than a certain gruff drago—”

"Thank you for your contribution, Kim Namjoon," Jungkook loudly interrupts.

Taehyung glances at Jungkook's apparel. “You should get changed."

“I don’t really have any casual clothes."

One of Taehyung’s eyes twitches. He pinches the bridge of his nose and he closes his eyes. He exhales, then slowly enunciates his next words. “I went to the market yesterday. I asked if you had proper clothing for today. You said yes.”

“Well, yes. I do have proper garments. That's all I have, aside from pajamas.”

“You can put on some of Taehyung’s clothes,” Jimin offers, as if speaking about his own clothes. “They’ll fit you.”

Taehyung can recognize a shrewd scheme happening before his eyes when he sees one.

“What a great idea! Can I?” Jungkook turns to face Taehyung with an innocent smile that does *not* fool Taehyung one bit.

Taehyung lifts a fist, his index menacingly pointing at Jungkook. “You’re lucky that I don’t have time to deal with whatever *this* is,” he says and motions between Jimin and Jungkook.

Taehyung swivels around to march up the stairs and inside his bedroom where he enters the walk-in closet. He picks out some simple black cargo pants with a long sleeved shirt, adding a dark gray sweater to the lot.

He throws his bundle at Jungkook who deftly catches it.

“Do you ever wear anything other than black?” Jungkook remarks.

Taehyung snatches his clothes back and starts walking toward his bedroom.

“No no no! I’m joking! I’m joking, give them to me.”

Taehyung pauses to pivot and quirk a brow.

“Please?”

This time Taehyung tosses the bundle at Jungkook’s face.

As they wait for the infuriating Prince to get changed, Taehyung verifies that he has everything they need in the bags he had packed yesterday.

Jimin laughs. “By the Elders.”

“Oh wow,” Namjoon chuckles. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in clothes like those.”

Crouched in the middle of the room, Taehyung twists around to peer at Jungkook.

The shirt is a bit loose on the shoulders, but Jungkook makes up for it by filling a lot more than Taehyung the — originally — baggy pants.

“The pants are a bit tight but it’s still pretty comfortable,” Jungkook smiles and tugs on the fabric that stretches over his thighs. “Oh my God. I look just like you.”

“You’re welcome.” Taehyung zips the bag shut while Jungkook bursts into laughter. “If everyone’s ready, let’s get moving.”

The others rise from the couch, joining Taehyung at the entrance door.

“Jin and Hoseok are waiting for us not far from here,” Taehyung starts. “Those not doing the transport will ride in the carriage. We’ll do most of the journey by flight while Jimin, Hoseok, Jin and I will swap every now and then. However once we’re near the Seven Isles, we’ll finish the rest of the trip by foot so no one can recognize any of our dragon forms.” He slings the handle of a

satchel over his shoulders, the others taking the leftover bags. “Hoseok will tell us what to do when we get there.” He hands Jungkook his mask while stashing his own in his pants’ pocket. “Does that work with everyone? Any questions?”

Everyone shakes their head except for Jungkook who raises a hand.

“What?”

“Can I be in your palm for the ride?”

“Why?”

“Because I like it,” Jungkook groans.

Taehyung guesses that whether Jungkook is in the carriage or in his talon won’t change a thing. “Sure.”

Jungkook’s brows fly up his forehead before grinning, bright and merry. “Thank you." He turns toward Jimin. “Is it okay if Revna stays in the carriage with you? She’s not fond of flying. You can introduce her to Seokjin and Hoseok.”

“It would be my utmost pleasure,” Jimin solemnly says and lifts the basilisk from Jungkook’s arms. “Hello, baby. I missed you. I’m sure you missed me too."

Taehyung shifts to his dragon counterpart. Once the carriage’s ropes have been attached around the gnarled fingers of his talon, he flies off toward the meeting point, Jungkook in his palm.

The flight there is brief.

The greeting, presenting, and Hoseok’s freak out at the presence of the snake are, however, a lot more long-winded, especially when Hoseok cries out and runs away through the forest while being hunted down by Jimin and the basilisk.

Taehyung gathers them back, both held by the collar of their shirt, one pushed forward while the other is dragged across the soil and weeping about refusing to be part of travel. He throws them both in the carriage, slams the door shut and ignores the incessant thumping fists to turn into his dragon form.

Jungkook, apparently too busy crying from laughter at Hoseok’s antics, doesn’t notice Taehyung waiting for him to climb on his palm.

Taehyung lowers his head. He deeply huffs through his nose, and Jungkook's balance teeters at the force of the wind.

After smacking Taehyung's snout, Jungkook settles on his seat for the trip, and Taehyung takes off.

The trip has been unexpectedly pleasant for the past few days.

The four dragonborns swap between each other throughout the travel, and when Taehyung is reverted back to his human form, he's installed in the large carriage that easily accommodates the six men in it. They take some breaks here and there to eat and sleep in the tents they have brought along.

The seven of them are settled around the bonfire Hoseok has started, cooking the meat. They still have a little less than two hours of walk, but have decided to have one last break before their visit.

"We need to agree on a code word," Hoseok announces.

"A code word?" Everyone echoes.

"There are warlocks who can take the appearance of whoever they want," Hoseok explains. "So if we split up, we need to make sure to have a way to determine if the one currently with us is the same we arrived with."

"It sounds crazy, but I had once gone back home with who I thought to be Hoseok but was someone else entirely. It was both an exciting and terrifying day," Seokjin laughs. "And this is why we agreed on code words after that."

"Exactly. Any ideas?"

"Nixes?" Taehyung proposes. "It's inconspicuous enough to be said randomly, but it's also rarely uttered enough for no one other than us to say it."

"Yeah," Hoseok nods and Seokjin as well. "That'd work."

"Everyone okay with it?" Taehyung says.

A chorus of agreement answers him.

"It's my turn now," Jimin grumbles.

Hoseok shields his left arm where the basilisk is curled around. "No."

"You've been cuddling her for two hours! And aren't you supposed to be scared of her? You *cried* when you first saw her."

"That was because I didn't know how cute she was," Hoseok counters.

"Either way, it's my turn. Let her go."

"Can't hear you over the sound of her adorable snoring."

"Jungkook. Do something."

Jungkook snickers from where he's sitting on a rock next to Taehyung. Taehyung had protested at the proximity that isn't *that* bad but still kind of is, however Jungkook is stubborn, perhaps more than Taehyung.

"I have to admit I never expected Amaris' Prince to have a snake pet," Seokjin says. He and Hoseok know she can come in and out of the ruby, but they're unaware that the snake is a basilisk, her sigil hidden by Yoongi's ink.

“What’s more shocking is that the Queen and King allowed him to keep her,” Jimin notes, voicing out Taehyung’s thoughts.

“Yeah, how come?” Taehyung questions. “It’s strange they agreed to that.”

“Well… I didn’t really give them a choice.” Jungkook has a thick scarf fastened around his neck, the new winter coat Taehyung had bought swathing him. “They refused at first, so I ran away from the citadel.”

Seokjin’s windshield laughter squeaks after Jungkook’s confession, the others — except Taehyung — joining in the hilarity.

“Jungkook has always caused all sorts of problems,” Namjoon laments, Taehyung reminded at once that the man is Jungkook’s page.

“I wanted to keep her,” Jungkook protests, and even if the lower part of his face is buried into the scarf, Taehyung can hear the pout in the Prince’s intonation. “But they refused, and so I took her with me and left. I was found by my handlers a couple days later and was punished. It was worth it though.”

“What happened after?”

“He ran away again.” Taehyung answers while Jungkook says “I ran away again.”

Taehyung snorts. “Fucking knew it.”

“Look at you predicting what I’m about to say,” Jungkook obnoxiously croons and leans his head on Taehyung’s shoulder, holding onto Taehyung’s arm. “What a lovely husband you are. I might swoon, you know?”

Taehyung sprawls a hand on Jungkook’s face to shove him away.

They’ve both agreed to not keep up with any pretense while in the presence of their friends.

“But yes. At first I kept running away,” Jungkook resumes. “Then I educated myself about snakes and I gave them a presentation about reptiles. I showed I had responsibility to take care of one. It took a while, but I’m obstinate when I want something, and so they eventually agreed. Namjoon and Yoongi also helped me convince them that Revna was safe to have around.”

“Is it safe?” Hoseok wonders.

Jimin snorts. “A bit late to ask that, ain’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Jungkook answers and Hoseok sighs in relief. “Unless you choose to attack me, but I’d advise against it.”

Taehyung’s shoulders shake at the way Hoseok tenses then relaxes then tenses again as he listens to Jungkook.

“You seem to have been a handful as a child,” Seokjin notes.

Namjoon and Yoongi both bark out a laugh. “Understatement of the century.”

Jungkook scoffs. “I was a good child?!”

“If by 'good' you mean constantly defying any authority, eloping at every chance you’d get, and loving to do exactly what was forbidden, then sure, you were an excellent child,” Yoongi fires.

“I wish we would’ve met back then,” Jimin pouts at Jungkook. “We would have been best friends.”

“I guess I can go suck a damn pine cone,” Taehyung grumbles, miffed.

“Start by taking those stuffed up your ass.” Jimin deftly dodges the zap Taehyung aims at him.

“I *was* a good kid,” Jungkook snips. “I had to be.”

Everyone falls quiet at the terseness in Jungkook’s voice.

It’s Jimin who breaks it. “Did you ever have someone you were promised to at birth or something like that?”

“No, not really." The tension in Jungkook diminishes. “Most of my childhood was spent learning how to become Amaris’ future King, among other things.”

“And all of that hard work led to this.” Hoseok vaguely waves in Taehyung's direction with a shake of his head.

Taehyung clicks his tongue. Jimin laughs as he and Hoseok high five each other.

“I’m not complaining,” Jungkook chuckles.

“You sure aren’t,” Yoongi jests while taking a sip from his drink.

When Jungkook mumbles a *‘Stop’* , Taehyung’s eyes settle on the Prince. “You’re talking behind my back?”

“No,” Jungkook says but it sounds more like a question, and Taehyung's suspicion heightens when Jungkook slightly shuffles away from him.

“Yes,” Namjoon and Yoongi confirm.

“Oh, really now?” Jimin begins with a sly smile. “Heard that Hoseok?”

“Loud and clear.” Hoseok's expression mirrors Jimin’s. “What’s dear Jungkook saying about Taehyung? I’m curious.”

“I’m not saying anything!” Jungkook's defensiveness is all the answer everyone needs to know that he is *certainly* saying a lot. “Don’t,” he warns his friends, in vain.

Namjoon turns toward the warlock. “Yoongi?” Yoongi sits up while Namjoon clears his throat and folds his legs beneath him, similar to how Jungkook tends to sit. “A Prince’s Gushing. Act 1, Scene 1.”

“Stop it!” Jungkook throws his metal that bounces off Namjoon’s leg.

“Hey, Jungkook,” Yoongi starts, “how—”

“Oh my God, you won’t believe it, Yoon. I met Vanae’s leaders’ son, right? And he is so, *so* handsome. I wasn’t expecting this at all. I thought he’d be an old geezer like the other potential suitors but he’s probably my age and he’s genuinely the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life?!” Namjoon, well, gushes. “He seems to be a bit of an ass, but honestly, his actual rear makes up for it.”

“Oh my God,” the real Jungkook mutters.

“Ah, really?” Yoongi replies. “He’s that handsome?”

“More than that,” Namjoon continues. “And he was wearing this red shirt that was—” He makes a cupping motion toward his pectorals. “And he was really assertive with Seohyung and Sungmin but also sweet to Sohee, and he didn’t care *at all* about who he was talking to. It was kind of attractive.”

Hoseok, Seokjin and Jimin are folded in half as they laugh, and even the basilisk emits a series of sounds that Taehyung assumes to be laughs.

Taehyung raises his cup to his face to hide his own smile behind it.

“Wait, let’s do scene 27,” Yoongi proposes.

“Oh, oh, yes!”

Jimin crawls up to them. He opens his palms in a rendition of a clapperboard and says “A Prince’s Gushing. Act 1, scene 27. Action!”

“Yoon, he’s an idiot but he’s so smart too. And he likes flowers and sculpting small animals, isn’t that cute?” Namjoon exclaims. Taehyung levels Jungkook with a betrayed look. “Oh, and have I told you he’s handsome? I think I haven’t mentioned it for the past five minutes. He’s really handsome, and not just handsome, you know, he’s kinda hot too. And pretty. His dragon form is the most beautiful. I hope you’ll get to see it. Do you think he’ll let me touch his wings one day or let me ride on his head during a flight?”

Jungkook erupts into a litany of *‘Shut up’* and *‘This isn’t me’* that his friends dutifully ignore.

A heat creeps up Taehyung’s neck from the secondhand embarrassment. He glances at Jungkook who has tugged the winter cloak around himself, the Prince mumbling about horrible friends and vengeance.

Namjoon and Yoongi halt their rendition for the night, breathless from their hilarity.

“I want to die,” Jungkook declares.

“This is the best play I’ve watched,” Jimin sniffles and wipes his eyes. “Even Taehyung is blushing.”

“I’m not fucking blushing."

Jungkook's beet red face peeks out from his cloak to peer at Taehyung. His eyes are curious before they drift on his friends next. “I’m never telling you anything ever again.”

“Yes you will,” Namjoon and the warlock both retort.

Jungkook huffs and glares ahead. “I hate you both.”

“Taehyung is quite the handsome man," Seokjin chips in. "There’s nothing to be ashamed of."

“He used to be courted by so many people,” Jimin snickers.

“Courted?”

“Dragonborns court each other if they're interested in pursuing a romantic relationship or more,” Seokjin clarifies. “They exchange gifts, food, attention and take each other out on dates. Things like those. It’s riddled with traditions that are more or less followed, usually less with new generations.”

“Oh.” Jungkook surveys Taehyung. “Have you ever courted anyone?”

“No,” Taehyung answers.

“Have you ever accepted someone’s courting?”

“Once.” But it had only been fueled by curiosity to see what all the fuss regarding dating was about. He hadn’t liked it one bit and has never gone on another date since then.

“How long ago was that?”

There’s an edge in Jungkook’s tone that catches Taehyung’s attention. Jungkook’s flush has dwindled — although still present —, his sharp gaze settled on Taehyung.

“Does it matter?”

“I just want to know,” Jungkook deflects.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

Taehyung’s eyes narrow, fixated on Jungkook who averts his own seconds later. “I was 15 or something when it happened,” Taehyung eventually replies.

Jungkook's gaze loses some of its edge. “I see.” He glares at the others when they cackle.

“We should head to bed,” Hoseok says, saving Taehyung from his ever growing confusion. “We’ll have a long day tomorrow.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Taehyung drags some more wood to the bonfire to keep it alight throughout the night as the group makes their way to their respective tents. Namjoon and the warlock share their own, while Hoseok, Seokjin and Jimin will sleep in another. Meaning that Taehyung and Jungkook occupy the third tent. He had complained about it, but Jimin had categorically refused to share the same tent as Taehyung, meaning that Taehyung has been stuck with the Prince for the past few days. Thankfully, it’s been uneventful so far.

So tonight is the same.

The two of them are bundled up under a heap of blankets, the tent's door zipped shut. The basilisk isn't here tonight, taken away by Jimin.

Taehyung closes his eyes in the hope of falling asleep for the next early morning.

An hour or more passes, and Taehyung is still awake.

He exhales through his nose.

"You can't sleep?" Jungkook whispers.

"No, I'm not sleepy." And Taehyung is also a tad on edge from the upcoming visit to Eden. He has never wanted to go there both to not damage his reputation, but also because of an apprehension regarding certain items sold there that he might stumble upon.

"Me either." Jungkook shuffles out of his sleeping bag. "I think I'll go out for a bit." He sits up and grabs the cloak to slide it over his shoulders. "Do you want to join?"

Taehyung doesn't ponder for long before he pushes aside the covers. He zips open the tent, however he and Jungkook both move forward to leave at the same time, their heads knocking together.

"Ow," Jungkook hisses and rubs a hand on his scalp.

"Dumbass. I was going first."

"No. I was. I was up before you."

"That's too bad." Taehyung pushes on Jungkook's chest to throw the Prince off balance who falls backward onto the blankets. Taehyung exits the tent and as he does, a hand punches the back of his thigh. Taehyung reprimands the 'hit' with a zap on Jungkook's forehead.

Taehyung rushes to sling his cloak over his body and shield himself from the negative temperatures. He grabs a pouch with pieces of dried meat in it, and after sitting down on the tree trunk, he munches on the snacks.

A hand sneaks from behind him that he bats away.

"Don't be stingy," Jungkook chides and settles a foot away next to Taehyung.

"Do you have to follow me everywhere like a lost hatchling?"

"I'm not following you, I'm sitting next to you."

"Same difference." Taehyung moves the pouch away from Jungkook when the latter attempts to reach for it again.

"Come on."

"There's another pouch in the bag. Get yours."

Jungkook huffs but does as said, retrieving his own night snack. "It's so good. You cooked it for us, right?" He asks amidst a bite and Taehyung nods. "You being a good cook is one of the things that

never ceases to surprise me. Like your love for plants."

"I'm full of wonders."

"You certainly are," Jungkook chuckles. "Speaking of plants, I visited Vanae's market with Jimin not too long ago. I found a book about nixes there."

"And?"

"And there was a bunch of speculation about what the raven nix does. You should read it if you haven't yet."

"But that's what they are: speculations. No one has ever managed to confirm anything."

"One said that the raven nixes are seen as useless for now because they never found a dragonborn powerful enough to 'drink' from and awaken its properties."

Taehyung loudly scoffs. " *I'm* powerful and when I had attached a raven Nix around my wrist for three months, nothing happened. I hadn't felt any different."

"I want to study it before winter ends."

Taehyung hesitates for a moment before saying "We've got some equipment in the basement that I brought from home, if you want to use them. My grandfather has some as well." He doesn't look at Jungkook, but Taehyung can nearly feel the way the Prince radiates with happiness next

"I'd love that," Jungkook says with an audible smile. "Maybe you could help me with it? If you want? It could be fun."

"We'll see," Taehyung mumbles and serves himself a cup of water.

"I saw another plant on our way out of Vanae. It was shaped like a huge, round starfish with a hole in the middle. It looked so odd."

Taehyung doesn't want to entertain the conversation — *or does he?* — but he can't possibly remain quiet when someone inquires about Vanae's flora — or any type of plant, really.

"It's called Rafflesia."

"What does it do?"

Now.

Taehyung isn't 'excited' that someone appears to share his faithful love for botany, but a buzz rises in him at Jungkook's question and genuine interest. "It smells like a corpse, and I mean literally so."

"No way."

"Yes way." Taehyung glances at Jungkook who's intently peering back at him. "It has the worst scent I ever smelled and that's where it got its other name: Corpse Flower. The worst part is that in spite of their horrifying scent, their properties are actually quite useful. You can make a bunch of

remedies and pomades with them. They'll stink though and taste awful, so you'll have to balance them with other ingredients, but…"

And Taehyung continues to explain, unable to stop.

At Jungkook's request, Taehyung launches himself with further details into what can be done with this flower. When he eventually does *shut up* Elders know how long later, Jungkook immediately asks about another plant he has seen in Vanae's forest. Taehyung replies, although more succinctly. Then, Jungkook shares about the flora proper to Amaris, some unknown to Taehyung, and this time Jungkook is the one to rave on and on.

Taehyung listens.

If he's completely honest with himself, the conversation that stretches over the night — even if it becomes more one-sided as Taehyung participates less — is fun.

And interesting.

Taehyung does not care about humans, and he doesn't want to learn anything new about them, but their lands appear to nurture an incredible flora that he has never really contemplated up till now. He wonders if the Prince would be fine with bringing to Taehyung some of the plants mentioned. Perhaps they could visit Amaris as well, if Taehyung isn't too skittish about being in human territory.

The bonfire has smothered to small flames by now.

The forest is dark around them and the sky as well, the latter dotted with a sea of stars.

Jungkook is now recounting a tale of where he had once found himself stuck up a tree while trying to catch a hanging flower that had turned out to not only be poisonous, but had also provoked a horrible rash on Jungkook's skin.

Taehyung props an elbow on his knee and nestles the lower part of his face in his palm when he catches the tug on his own lips. Can't have the Prince think Taehyung is amused by the story.

Nevertheless, Jungkook continues to talk, and Taehyung listens to him.

Taehyung doesn't know how much time has passed since he and Jungkook have left their tent. At least not until a zipper being yanked tears them out of their discussion.

"Can you two shut up already?! It must be 4 am and I'm trying to sleep, for Elders' sake!"

"Sorry…" Jungkook whispers, contrite. "I didn't realize we were talking that lo—"

"Go to *sleep.*" The tent zips shut on a drowsy, furious Jimin.

Jungkook snorts. "We should sleep. We're supposed to be up in... Ugh, four hours if it's 4 a.m."

"I don't know why you're whining about it when all you've done is sit around for the past few days." Taehyung stands and he enters the tent again seconds later.

"First of all," Jungkook begins and closes the tent's door. "I can—"

“What did I just fucking say?! Shut! *Up!”*

“You shut up! You’re the one who woke me up,” Hoseok exclaims.

“Because Taehyung and Jungkook are blabbering about flowers at ass crack of dawn like two lovesick idiots making flower crowns for each other and—”

“Stop screaming!”

“You stop screaming!”

Taehyung sighs when he hears some struggling and fighting in the tent Hoseok, Jimin — and poor Seokjin — occupy. He widely yawns once nuzzled in his sleeping bag. He’s a lot sleepier now, and he supposes that talking — or rather listening — to the Prince for apparently two hours had its use.

Lulled to slumber by the crackling embers of the bonfire, Taehyung is already half asleep when Jungkook’s hushed voice elevates in the tent.

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung makes a noncommittal sound.

“Can I scoot closer to you? I’m cold.”

“No."

Silence answers him, then Jungkook does. “I’m pouting, just so you know.”

“Gut wrenching.”

“I’m really cold, and you’re warm."

Taehyung waves a gust of warm air in the tent and allows his fire breath to continue coursing through him, the heat emanating from his body keeping the area warm.

“Thank you."

“Now quiet. I’m trying to sleep.”

“Goodnight, prick.”

Taehyung wakes up with a migraine and feeling as though he hasn’t slept for a single minute. Jungkook and the others appear to experience the same if the general drowsiness in the group is any given.

“Children,” Hoseok calls out two hours later that were spent leaving the carriage and their unimportant belongings a few miles away. “Gather around!”

Taehyung rolls his eyes as he fastens his face mask around his face.

Everyone has theirs on, even the Prince who looks nothing like his usual appearance. Gone are the regal clothing, replaced by Taehyung's simple, worn out ones, yet even then Jungkook still has this pompous, royal *air* to him.

"Rule number one: don't touch anything, especially not any objects sold there," Hoseok begins. "Rule number two: if you want to buy something, always bargain. Rule number three: I hope you two brought enough gems and coins. You'll need them," he adds and peers at Taehyung and Jungkook. Jungkook grins and nods. "Rule number four: let's have fun!"

"I'm actually really pumped," Jungkook announces, as if the way he vibrates with palpable excitement isn't enough of a hint. "I've never been to a black market. I wasn't aware there was one at the Seven Isles to begin with."

"This one is quite peculiar, but incredibly riveting. It's a good introduction to black markets," Seokjin says.

"A good introduction?" Jungkook echoes.

"Let's just say that Eden is a tamer version of other black markets, so to speak, yet the most eclectic one," Seokjin answers.

"It's more of an underground city with very few rules and laws," Hoseok continues. "You've got a bunch of people living there."

"Oh," Jungkook breathes out. "How many black markets are there?"

"Too many," Yoongi answers while Hoseok and Seokjin say "Not enough."

"Has everyone grabbed what they need?" Taehyung interjects. The group responds with a chorus of confirmation. "As we agreed on, I'll be with the viper and the warlock."

"This sounds like the start of a really bad joke," Jimin snorts.

"The rest of you will be together," Taehyung carries on, discarding his friend's remark. "Hoseok will guide you."

"And who will guide *you?"* Namjoon notes.

"Me," Taehyung and Yoongi both say.

They glare at each other.

Jungkook emits a long, drawn out sigh. "God and Elders both, give me the strength."

"Jin, remember when I mentioned the word primordial?" Taehyung asks.

"Yes."

"One of our goals is to see if we can find any information that may include this word. Another is to find an object that can decipher ancient arcanes, and a third is to have something that can remove the tracker Jungkook may have on him." A fourth is to research about the plague, but Taehyung

keeps this to himself. "We should go now. The earlier we're done with this, the better. Let's all keep Hoseok's instructions in mind. He's the one familiar with Eden, not us."

Hoseok claps again. "En route, children!"

Seokjin slaps the back of Hoseok's head who pouts at him.

"Is it really that dangerous?" Jungkook inquires as the group begins to advance.

Hoseok turns around. "Death is at every corner."

Jungkook's face sobers with alarm.

Taehyung levels Hoseok with a chastising look. "Stop it."

Hoseok's shoulders shake while Jungkook tuts at him.

The entrance to Eden isn't quite inside the Seven Isles' market islands, Taehyung realizes as they walk through a deserted village.

The houses are completely ruined, the walls half crumbling and blasted away. They enter one of them, the interior covered in spider webs and dust that swirls in puff at every step the group makes, and they pass by what had once been a living room.

They halt in front of a door minutes later. Hoseok opens it.

The group climbs down the stairs.

Taehyung isn't very fond of being in a basement since he has discovered what his own hides at home, but there doesn't seem to be any hidden graveyard in this one at least.

They soon pause near a large metal door where a small, rectangular window is carved at the top.

The panel is tugged open in a clang.

"Kaleidoscope," Hoseok says.

The window's panel is closed, then some clattering erupts behind the door before it's pulled open by a slender man, his limbs lithe and ashen. Taehyung isn't sure if this guy is supposed to be the door's guard, and he can't help but wonder if the man is a warlock.

"Didn't see you in days," the man exclaims with a clap on Hoseok's back. "Thought you were dead."

Hoseok laughs. "Nah. Can't get rid of me that easily, I'm afraid."

"Those your hatchlings?" The man asks with a nod toward the six people awkwardly standing behind Hoseok.

“Yup.”

“Get in,” the man orders, his tone gruff when addressing the others.

Taehyung and his group walk inside a small room. They’re led through a series of sinuous corridors that he catalogs every twist and turn of. Just in case.

Everyone is quiet, a tangible nervousness and anticipation draped over them.

Something grips onto the back of Taehyung's sleeve under his cloak. When he looks to his right, he, as expected, sees Jungkook next to him, only the latter's alert eyes visible.

Taehyung narrows his focus back on their path, wordlessly allowing Jungkook’s proximity for now.

A brouhaha rises, growing louder the closer they get to the heart of the building.

They arrive inside a vast room, the walls lined up with dozens of elevators. Hoseok guides them to a vacant one that they all step into at his cue. Hoseok yawns as he closes the gate. Whirring of the mechanical elevator erupts as it begins its descent.

“Who’s with who already?”

“You’re with Seokjin, Jimin and Namjoon,” Taehyung answers.

Hoseok hums. His head twists to peer at Taehyung over his shoulder. “I was thinking that it might be safer if I replace Yoongi’s spot.”

Taehyung frowns. “Why?”

“You don’t know your way down there, and it’s easy to get lost. Seokjin can guide the second group.”

That’s a good point.

“I can still be in Jungkook’s group,” Yoongi interjects.

“Yoongi. I can very well defend myself,” Jungkook retorts. “Plus Revna and Taehyung will be there. Hoseok as well.”

Yoongi is visibly displeased, but he relents after a few seconds. “Fine."

“So Taehyung and Jungkook in my group? And you four in the other?” Hoseok summarizes.

“Yeah.”

The elevator comes to a halt minutes later.

Everything is loud outside, barely muffled by the metallic gate. Taehyung clenches his hands into fist to abate the tremors in them, his heart heavily thudding in his chest.

“Ah, I forgot an important rule,” Hoseok starts, a hand on the gate. “Do not trust anyone here, no matter who they portray themselves to be.”

“It reminds me of that time where someone who I thought to be a beggar turned out to be the leader of an underground gang,” Seokjin laughs. “I almost got myself into trouble because of that.”

“Precisely,” Hoseok nods. “We can only trust each other. We have the code word for that. Which is?”

“Nixes,” everyone quietly supplies.

“Great!”

Hoseok slides the gate open.

His head is pounding, a migraine tearing through his brain.

He groans as he awakens, disorientated. He coughs when he inhales some dirt. His eyes flutter open onto trees and bushes, the soil close to his face. He pushes himself on his elbows as he surveys the forest surrounding him, however the world sways around him. He staggers his feet, looking around through bleary eyes.

Some arcane has been used on him, potent and unrestrained. Maybe a spell or a concoction.

He doesn’t call out for his friends no matter how much he wants to. For all he knows, those that have put him to sleep are still around. Instead, he tracks the scent of smoky embers he can pick up north-east.

It doesn’t take long for him to stumble on the remnants of the bonfire, the flames snuffed out with water.

He touches the burnt wood.

It’s still damp, however not drenched, and he estimates that the rest of the group has left perhaps a couple hours ago.

Rapid footsteps erupt behind him. He swivels around, his arcane swirling in his breath pouch and ready to blast. Before he launches his attack, he’s greeted by a familiar face who looks as lost and alarmed as he is.

“Fuck,” Hoseok curses.

Chapter End Notes

MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA I'm so excited for the next chapter y'all 😭 I have been WAITING to finally write it since day one I’m so pumped XDDDD Shit will hit the fan real hard, a lot will go down and memories from the past shall resurface 👀 Don’t hesitate to tell

me your thoughts about this chapter hehe 👀🤍 Do you have any idea of what is going or are you in the dark? 🧐

Update wise I'll try to keep this rhythm of one chapter per week if I can!! Sometimes it might take me longer than that considering the size of the chapters I post, and if it does please be patient with me 🫶 Thank you for reading to those who did and please don't hesitate to comment, they're always very much loved hehe 🤍

Fun fact: the rafflesia is an actual real plant (unlike the nixes that I created for the story) and I can only imagine how horrible the scent must be 😭

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH12.

Taehyung's face mask
Jungkook's face mask
Aurora's world map (I also forgot to put in the earlier chapters SLB's world map I sketched so here it is!! It's ugly and missing some city names but I had lost my apple pen at the time and still haven't found it again so I can't properly draw it again 👍)

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Yoongi and his ravens made by @taeoceans

Chapter 13: Eden's Red Apples

Chapter Summary

Taehyung, Jungkook and Hoseok visit Eden, and meet some of the peculiar inhabitants of the underground city. A meeting drives to a second, then a third, and one leads to a forgotten bird keeper.

Chapter Notes

!!Please read !! The content warning spoil some parts of this chapter so if you don't have many things that trigger you like me, feel free to skip them!! If not please make sure to go through them 🤍 Additionally before you read this chapter, keep in mind that SLB will NOT have any non-con or rape, or implied non-con/rape or anything of those lines!!

Either way buckle up for this chapter and the upcoming one XDD

First some song recs!! I suggest listening to Arcane's soundtrack while reading this chapter, it's very fitting for the ambiance for the scenes that happen in the black market. As for more proper song rec (they're all from youtube 😭), they're all pretty approximate but I might make a proper playlist one day hehe

a) Playlist 1 From beginning to "Jimin drops his hands and peers up, catching Yoongi's kind smile."
b) Playlist 2 From "The door swings open inside a small wood shed as Hoseok..." to "His vision is hazy. His lids fall shut..."
c) Phobia by Nothing But Thieves (slowed + reverb) I HIGHLY RECOMMEND!! From "Jungkook has learned to cry on command if needed..." to approximately "'Of course, you've convinced me'..."
d)EPIC COVER | "Hit Me Baby One More Time" by J2 [feat. Blu Holliday] From after the song 'Phobia' and until the end

To those who haven't seen on my Twitter account, I will be updating twice this upcoming week!! Chapter 14 will be posted Tuesday or Wednesday , and chapter 15 Sunday or Monday, and after what I'll keep the rhythm of one chapter per week hehe 👀🤍

!!Content warnings next 🤍

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Cw:

1) Blood and violence
2) Kidnapping
3) Aftermath of torture (nothing too graphic and it's 'just' the aftermath of it)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Boisterous voices, yells, laughter and more assault Taehyung's ears when the gate opens.

The group tentatively steps out of the elevator at Hoseok's guidance. They arrive at some kind of plaza, the streets crowded by all kinds of people, even the occasional dragonborn with their wings out.

The place looks like some sort of underground city.

Above him is a ceiling of rocks and stalactites that a few of the taller, raggedy architectures graze with their rooftops. The ground is littered with shops, street markets and more buildings that seem to be inhabited by those populating the place. The absence of sunlight or opening to the exterior creates a dim, cloudy atmosphere that is lightened by candles and rows of hundreds of lanterns dangling above the 'town'.

Foul scents of blood, filth and hell knows what else suffuse Taehyung's nose. His restlessness grows.

Hoseok spreads his arms as he swivels around with a smile. "Welcome to Eden."

Taehyung scrutinizes his surroundings, worried that he may see some of them, however the place is devoid of any familiar faces. At least for now. There's a nagging voice at the back of his head that he momentarily shakes off to speak to his group. "Remember what we're supposed to find?"

Everyone erupts in a chorus of *'Yes'*.

"We're reconvening in three hours on the *dot* at the meeting point that we all agreed upon," Taehyung starts and checks his watch. "Try to leave in advance to arrive earlier. Don't be late, but in the chance that someone has gotten lost or is busy, we'll wait an additional twenty minutes. If by then the one or those missing haven't arrived yet, we'll come back here to look for them. No matter what happens, we reconvene at the surface. Everyone agrees?"

"Yes sir," Seokjin quips with a solemn look.

"Great."

"Be safe, and remember the rules," Hoseok warns as the group begins to split in two. "Don't trust anyone. I mean it."

"Be careful," Yoongi says to Jungkook and hugs him after Namjoon has done the same.

"You too."

Namjoon, Yoongi, Seokjin and Jimin disappear amidst the people.

“Now... Where should we start?” Hoseok grins.

Jungkook’s shoulders are drawn tight, fingers gripping at his arms that are loosely folded over his chest. Taehyung calls forth his lighting to lightly zap the Prince who startles.

“What are you daydreaming about?”

“I’m not daydreaming at all.” Jungkook crosses the distance between himself and Taehyung. “I’m just…”

“Scared?” Hoseok says with a teasing lilt and half smile. He’s not wearing a mask unlike the others in the group.

“Anxious would be a better term, but yes, I’m a little scared,” Jungkook confesses. “I don’t know my way around here, and it's nothing like how everything is above. It's clearly a lot more…. unruly, here. I suppose those in Eden are more… You know.” He trails off. “More prone to perhaps hurt and steal, among other things. If I get lost, I’d—”

“Don’t get lost,” Taehyung jests.

“Great advice,” Jungkook derides, but it lacks its usual petulance. It’s clipped, the words as tense as he looks.

“You’ll be fine,” Taehyung sighs and nods ahead at Hoseok who guides them down a street, Taehyung and Jungkook closely following him.

“Yes,” Jungkook belatedly answers but it sounds uncertain.

“It’s not like you’re on your own,” Taehyung carries on.

“I know.”

“Do you?”

Taehyung pauses when Jungkook does. Jungkook’s eyes flit over Taehyung’s face, as though searching for something, and he seems to find his answer because his shoulders loosen as he nods.

“Good,” Taehyung says. Jungkook ducks his head. “We need something to remove a potential tracking spell before we do anything else,” he tells Hoseok after catching up to him.

“I know just the right person."

“And you couldn’t say that earlier when we mentioned it because…?”

“It’d spoil all the fun,” Hoseok grins and Taehyung pinches the bridge of his nose. “Plus I'm not sure if she’s available, but it doesn’t hurt to check.”

Taehyung looks behind when he doesn’t see Jungkook in his peripheral vision anymore. “Viper."

Jungkook, who had been examining some kind of animal skull on a stool, jogs toward Taehyung. “Sorry.”

“Don’t zone out if you don’t want to get lost,” Taehyung grumbles. “I won’t be looking for you, and I’m not here to babysit your ass. We’ve got work to do.”

“I know, I know,” Jungkook dismisses and there it is, the brattiness that is punctuated by flippant wave. “How about you work on not being a prick every hour of every day?”

“Sounds preposterous.”

Jungkook huffs a chuckle.

Taehyung and Jungkook trail after Hoseok as they make their way through the streets and occasional roads. Most don’t pay a sliver of attention to them, the group of three lost amidst the sea of thousands of more visitors and inhabitants.

Just like them, a few other people wear cloaks and masks, however Taehyung's own accoutrement grows increasingly stuffy the deeper they delve into the stifling city. He eventually discards it, pushing the hood back and unfastening the buckles to throw the cloak atop a dumpster. He rolls his shoulders, feeling more comfortable already.

A few sellers stop the group here and there, and to Taehyung’s surprise, some send suggestive looks their way, more specifically when they stop in front of a particular establishment.

Taehyung stares at the tavern turned *brothel.*

“You’re joking, right?”

“Don’t judge those I work with,” Hoseok chastises with a wiggle of his index finger that Taehyung smacks away.

“Do we have to get inside?”

“If you want that potential tracker removed, yes, but don’t worry,” Hoseok says and opens the entrance door, “she works fast.”

Taehyung mutters under his breath but he steps inside, Jungkook behind him.

“By the Elders.”

“Dear God…”

The interior is…

Well.

As one would expect it to be.

There are platforms occupied by twirling dancers dressed in more or less revealing attires that are as extravagant as the colorful makeup adorning the workers’ face. Customers and clients are populating the seats surrounding the podiums, some cheering, others whistling or sipping on glasses of alcohol while more throw coins. Music is blaring where a bard and their musicians are performing on a stage at the far back of the tavern, the melody carried through the vast room.

The nakedness is, quite frankly, awkward to witness.

Taehyung and Jungkook's gazes meet, one seeming as uncomfortable as the other feels.

"Follow me, children," Hoseok chirps.

Taehyung does, shouldering his way through the masses. He looks over his shoulder and when he notices how Jungkook nearly gets tripped by a rude customer, Taehyung shoves the guy away and grabs Jungkook's elbow to tug him closer — not without aiming a pointed glare at the stranger.

"Fucking hell," Taehyung spits once they've walked up the stairs leading to the second floor where Hoseok awaits them.

"You can grab a chair and wait there. I have to check if she's here," Hoseok explains before disappearing inside a corridor.

This second floor seems to be more of a VIP one. The customers are less abundant, and there are booths lining up the walls, this floor a lot cleaner than the first one.

Taehyung trudges alongside the balcony overlooking the first floor to settle at the bar. Jungkook sits on a stool on his right.

He's noticing the plethora of glances sent his and Jungkook's way, both from the workers and customers. One even has the gall to stop next to Taehyung and drag his hand down his bicep in a motion as suggestive as everything has been in this damn brothel. Thankfully, Taehyung is quite the expert at fending off obnoxious people, mainly through a callous glower. The audacious man saunters away with a flippant tilt of his chin.

Reminds me of the Prince, Taehyung thinks to himself.

Taehyung clicks his tongue and turns toward Jungkook. "I don't know how—"

Jungkook has found himself in a similar situation as Taehyung, however a tad worse.

A burly, tall man is standing in front of Jungkook who's leaning against the bar. Jungkook's hood is slid back, the tousled strands doing nothing to hide the dark gaze he levels the stranger with. The Prince doesn't look concerned at all. He's relaxed in his seat, with a certain poise draped over him that may be due to the sharp dagger he has pressed underneath the man's jaw.

Taehyung internally sighs.

With a hand tucked in his pants' pocket, Taehyung nudges the man away from Jungkook. "Fuck off." Perhaps Taehyung can trade this rescue with coffee when they'll be back to their house, he muses. He doesn't want to admit it — at least not verbally —, but the Viper makes a *mean* coffee that Taehyung may have grown addicted to.

The guy laughs. He's quite impressive in size, towering over Taehyung by at least two heads, maybe three. He's what Junhyun and Minsoo's child would look like — with bulging yet rotund muscles —, and Taehyung promptly dismisses the revolting thought.

"What is a boy like you doing here? I was talking with him," Numskull grins.

Taehyung doesn't know how this establishment works, if fights break out often, however from the gazes of pure interest and entertainment settled on him, he has an inkling of how it is. "You heard me the first time. Fuck off."

“You’re new around here."

“Well observed, detective,” Taehyung drawls out.

Jungkook snorts. “You sound like Jimin.”

“And you should—” Taehyung’s retort is interrupted by a hand the size of his fucking *head* that curls around his shoulder and squeezes. He bristles at the touch.

“Lemme teach ya a thing or two,” Numskull starts. “First: I’m the boss around here.”

No buffoon like Numskull would ever be the owner of the prestigious looking brothel like this one, and by the eye rolls the bartender and some of the customers make, Taehyung is correct. “Just fuck off when someone tells you to, eh?”

“You think a human like you can scare me? I’m a dragonborn,” Numskull growls.

“So am I.”

Surprise flashes across Numskull's face.

Taehyung would laugh if his ire hadn't been worsening by the second.

“Interesting.” Numskull lets go of Taehyung. “Not as interesting as him,” he adds with a nod toward Jungkook.

Jungkook's pleased, curious gaze darts between Taehyung and Numskull. He's clearly enjoying what is happening, even sipping on a glass of water the bartender hands to him.

Taehyung has half a mind to simply vacate the bar and let Jungkook fend for himself if this is so amusing. “We don’t have time for your bullshit," Taehyung settles on saying.

“Why?” Numskull laughs. “He’s yours?”

“Yeah, Numskull. He's my *husband,”* Taehyung rasps in a low rumble. He stalks closer to the guy whose composure wavers. “So for the last time: fuck. Off.”

Taehyung catches the tattletale signs because the guy is a damn idiot who most likely only knows bar fights and hasn’t trained in combat for years with a lethal Park Jimin: like the way Numskull’s right foot drags across the ground, or his shoulder that draws back.

Numskull is strong, perhaps even more than Taehyung when it comes to raw strength, so Taehyung would have earned himself a broken cheekbone if he hadn't deftly stepped out of the fist's way.

Taehyung easily avoids the flurry of punches the guy tries to aim at his face, and when Numskull switches weapons for a stool, Taehyung leaps backward to evade the swing.

Then, Taehyung moves with swift agility.

He ducks when Numskull hurls the stool toward him that shatters against the wall. Taehyung crosses the distance in one step, and without holding an ounce of power, he slams his fist into Numskull's abdomen.

Numskull is sent flying across the room, crashing onto a table that bursts into splinters.

People cheer and applaud, laughter bursting around them.

“I told you you’d regret it,” Jungkook scolds Numskull.

Numskull pushes the pieces of wood off himself and rises on his feet. His eyes have shifted to those of his dragon counterpart. His mouth opens where blue flames swirl, about to be breathed out. Some people yell at Numskull to stop but he discards them.

So Taehyung extends an arm and he settles on the force arcane that he breathes out around his hand. This breath is invisible as it shoots forward to wrap around Numskull’s throat. Taehyung constricts his grip.

The blue flames wane. The guy's hands fly up to try and grab at the intangible hand not quite strangling him yet.

Taehyung walks forward until his fingers are the one to squeeze the air out of Numskull’s mouth. “Now,” he starts and summons a second breath. Orange flames lick out of his mouth when he speaks, and he doesn’t need to see his eyes to know that they have taken the same color of his fire. “Whether you get to take another breath depends entirely on your answer.”

Numskull stops struggling in Taehyung’s hold.

“I told you to fuck off. Three fucking times. Yet you did not. What do you say in return?” Taehyung tightens his clamp, nails digging into the skin when Numskull growls.

Numskull wheezes as only a thin thread of air must be sent to his lungs. “I’m— I’m sorry," he says, yet his glare still remains defiant.

Too much for Taehyung's liking. “I’ll let you go if you ask nicely."

Numskull’s internal struggle is as entertaining as it is annoying, however seconds later, he finally stammers a *‘Please.’*

Taehyung recedes his arcane then lets go.

Numskull drops on the ground, panting and coughing.

Taehyung doesn’t give the guy another look as he rejoins Jungkook at the bar, ignoring the cackles mocking Numskull. He leans over the counter and props his elbows on it. “How do you always end up attracting unwanted attention like that?”

“Unlike you, I don’t have a brooding aura to detract people from approaching me,” Jungkook retorts without missing a beat.

Taehyung gazes at the dagger Jungkook slides in the inner pocket of his vest. “Is it the one you commissioned to Jimin?”

“Mhm.” Jungkook excitedly nods. “It’s serpent themed,” he proudly adds and shows the prized possession where a scale motif accentuated by two serpent metal heads adorn the sheathe. “He—”

“Hi, dear. You seem quite strong, a lot more than Jongho,” a woman says with a suave timber.

Taehyung peers at her, unsure of who she's addressing. He opens his mouth to dispel the women, but he stills when he feels a hand on his thigh.

Jungkook leans between Taehyung and the bar to speak to the woman. "He's already occupied with his husband. He's also a lot kinder than I am."

Taehyung scoffs at the lie.

"Unlike me, his proclivities in Eden and other markets don't involve trades of humans... Ah… Visceral treasures," Jungkook continues with a somber smile. "I assume you would rather not create any further tumult in this fine establishment, correct?"

"R—Right." The corner of the woman's mouth twitches around an uncomfortable curve. "My apologies."

“No worries,” Jungkook chirps.

“You know I’ve killed before, right? Unlike *you,* ” Taehyung fires, because it's sensible information to provide his *husband* with.

By the Elders.

Taehyung is married.

“Who?” Jungkook wonders, unfazed.

“Some of them." Taehyung doesn’t expand on what he means by that. The Prince is smart enough to figure it out.

Jungkook nods. “Good.”

Taehyung opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted by Hoseok.

“She’s here, follow me."

Taehyung and Jungkook both leave, the former scowling at Numskull, and the latter humming to himself.

They enter a corridor. Hoseok opens a door leading to a room that the three of them step into. It's more of a bedroom, really, one that reeks of sex.

Taehyung readjusts the mask covering the lower part of his face.

“Oh,” Jungkook astutely says.

A woman is laid down on a large, round bed in the middle of the room. She’s bare from her chest to most likely lower down, and she’s surrounded by men, women and everything in between in all shades of naked. Her hair is what strikes Taehyung the most, wild and fluffy, the curls of a deep red framing her tanned skin.

“You bring me new angels, I see,” the woman purrs.

Taehyung's gaze darts away to fixate on the wall. *A safe spot*. He sees the woman stand in his peripheral vision and yup. She's *entirely* naked and walking toward Taehyung and Jungkook. She stops right in front of them.

"Oh God," Jungkook wisely mumbles and covers his eyes with a hand.

The woman hums. She trails both of her index fingers down Taehyung and Jungkook's chests. "Would you like to play with us?"

"I'm gay," Taehyung declares as Jungkook blabbers a *'Me too'*.

"I have boys that would love to be served by you. Or serve you, or both, whichever you prefer," the woman carries on.

Taehyung deeply inhales and exhales. He swats the finger away. "We're here for business. I'd like to get down to it."

"Oh we always happily get down in this house," the woman jests.

Hoseok barks out a laugh. Jungkook snickers while Taehyung groans.

"My angels," she starts and turns toward the people comfortably laid on the mattress, "vacate the place at once. I have work to do."

The departure is horrible.

Not only are the 'angels' nearly all naked, but they also plant a kiss on the woman's lips before they exit the room, one even receiving a slap on their rear that resounds between Taehyung's ears.

The woman walks to a table and she — *thank the Elders* — slides on a robe then sits on a chair next to it, fastening the belt and covering herself up. The table is littered with… objects of all sorts that Taehyung does his best to not question the use of.

"I sell a wide range of amusing toys," the woman offers when she catches where his gaze has drifted, and Taehyung promptly understands that *she* is the owner of the brothel. "If you would like to purchase, my shop is right next to this house."

"No," Taehyung dismisses. "We need to remove a potential tracker."

"On who?" The woman inquires. Taehyung jabs a thumb in Jungkook's direction. "Come here, my boy," she beckons Jungkook.

Jungkook obeys. He presents a hand when she asks for it.

Taehyung doesn't like this. He doesn't trust this woman one bit. "Don't try anything fancy."

"I'm known for sticking to my words, among other things." She pushes aside a bottle of oily lube to grab a pot plant as she says this. "Let me see." She brings the plant to Jungkook's hand. The leaves extend, their stems wrapping around Jungkook's fingers and wrist. Her lids fall shut.

The room suddenly fills with a potent and palpable arcane that renders the air stiff and heavy.

Taehyung's eyes widen as he surveys the woman. "By the Elders."

“Meet Hyuna, one of the most powerful warlocks I have ever met in my entire life,” Hoseok supplies.

Yeah. Taehyung can believe that.

Hyun's eyes flutter open. She watches her plant for a brief moment, nodding her head to it. “Interesting,” she purrs after a few seconds. Her gaze is sharp when it settles on Jungkook. She takes away her plant to gently rest it on the table. “You are a fascinating one, noble angel. What is your name?”

“None of your damn business,” Taehyung interjects.

Hyuna tuts with a shake of her head. “You should be taught some lessons, gruff boy.”

“I can’t say my name for reasons you probably understand,” Jungkook says.

“What did you find?” Hoseok inquires.

“That is for me and my client to know only. Professional secrecy.” Hyuna winks and it seems to piss off Hoseok who frowns at her. “You do have a tracker on you, angel." Taehyung and Jungkook glance at each other. “The warlock who created it is quite powerful. Thankfully, I am even more,” she smiles and stands. “Follow me.”

Jungkook glances at Taehyung before trailing after Hyuna, Taehyung and Hoseok next.

This new room is a stark contrast to the bedroom.

This one feels more like a greenhouse rather than a place inside a brothel. Plants are hanging from the ceiling and shrouding the walls, many more laid on tables and shelves, crowding the space as the group squeezes toward a more open space at the center.

Hyuna sings under her breath while collecting some herbs and vials. She pauses here and there to talk to a plant, and it’s at the latter that Taehyung properly examines the room.

The plants move, in spite of the lack of wind. Whether it be the leaves, stems or petals, most of the flora sways from side to side or lean toward Hyuna’s hands when she caresses one of them.

“What payment do you prefer? Gems? Coins?”

“Coins would be great,” Jungkook answers.

“It’ll be 8 500 coins, if so.”

“Fucking hell,” Taehyung curses. “Does every warlock charge their services with such obscene prices?”

“They do when they’re competent, prick,” Jungkook rebuts with a snide look. He takes out two pouches. After rummaging through them to adjust the content of one, he gives the first to Hyuna, however the woman does not reach for it. Instead, the leaf of a plant does and grabs the pouch to rest it on its bulbous, green head.

“You will drink a flower,” Hyuna starts, her back to the room while she shuffles at the workstation. “Within two hours or so, it will completely erase the warlock’s arcane that is on you. Two hours is

usually the time it takes for it to eat the arcane and for you to then digest the flower. There is no lingering effect aside from a very brief dizziness." She turns her head to peer at Taehyung then at Jungkook. “Your gruff boy will be here to carry you if need be.”

Jungkook tugs the hood over his head, but the motion isn’t quick enough for Taehyung to not notice how the tip of Jungkook’s ears turn red.

“No side effects at all?” Taehyung presses.

“None. Some of my children *love* devouring arcane.” As if on cute, a plant that looks like a carmine venus flytrap with *actual* pointy teeth opens its mouth. “This one will create the flower after drinking the potion,” she says and chats with her plant.

Taehyung uses this time to take Hoseok aside. “Can she be trusted?”

“Of course. I’ve known her since forever. If you can’t trust her, you can trust me.”

“I don’t like this. Something has been bothering me since we arrived here but I don’t know what.”

“No offense at all, but this might just be your paranoia talking.” Hoseok rests a hand on Taehyung’s shoulder. “It’s fine. I know my way and the people here.”

“This isn’t some kind of spell she’ll throw on him. He’ll drink whatever the hell the flower will be.”

“Do you have another idea? Because I personally don’t, and the fact that you resorted to coming to Eden is enough of an indication that *you’re* in a dead end. Raven guy can’t help, and she’s the only person I know who can.”

Taehyung rubs a palm down his face. “I know... Sorry. I’m a bit on edge. I feel like shit is about to hit the fan at any moment.”

“If it does, I’ll clean it up, as I always do."

An idea pops in Taehyung’s head. “Wait, Viper.” He walks back to the center of the room. “You still have the ring with you? The warlock’s?”

“I do, and I also have a few pages of the book, so we’ll be able to use it,” Jungkook says, visibly understanding what Taehyung is hinting at.

They wait for a little bit as Hyuna still converses with her plant, coaxing and praising it.

Jungkook pokes at a bright blue flower at some point.

Taehyung bats the Prince’s hand away with a reprimanding stare. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Drink, my pretty,” Hyuna says to the plant, feeding it the concoction. “Yes, to remove a warlock’s arcane. It is a powerful one, so we need an equally powerful flower.” And the plant… nods? Somehow? *Somewhat?*

Once the vial is empty, the plant that Taehyung suspects to be carnivorous stills. The soil moves as the bottom of the plant’s stem grows more swollen and round. The sphere in the stem moves upward, soon expanding in the plant’s mouth that lowers its head over the wooden table.

Taehyung is fascinated, and if he had no ounce of shame, he'd fire question after question after *more* questions at the warlock.

"Present your hands."

Jungkook promptly complies with an excitement that reflects Taehyung's. His palms face upwards, placed underneath the plant's mouth that opens. Amidst the saliva that dribbles down, a tiny seed rests in the middle of Jungkook's palms, nowhere near the size of the sphere that had stretched the plant's stem.

Taehyung is nonplussed. " *This* is gonna—"

An arcane spread through the room, emanated by the seed. The rest of the flora vibrates around them in rustles of leaves, a buzz running through the room. It all falls quiet when the seed burgeons in Jungkook's hands and grows into what looks like a regular red spider flower, saved for the mouth equipped by pointy carmine teeth clicking open at the heart of the flower.

Taehyung marches toward Jungkook and leans over the flower to try and poke one of the petals, however Jungkook swats him away.

"Don't be stupid," the damn *brat* says. "Is it really safe for me to eat… this? Her?"

"Of course," Hyuna assures.

Jungkook surveys the flower that sways and undulates in his palm. "Will it feel pain?"

For the first time since they have met Hyuna, the playfulness is gone from her demeanor, replaced by a genuine shock. Then a gentle smile tugs at her lips. "No, she won't. You simply have to drink her. She will handle the rest and melt away."

"Alright." Jungkook huffs a puff of air, then he looks at Taehyung. "If I die, take care of Lovely."

"Shut up and eat the damn flower," Taehyung fires, both eager to see what will happen and not willing to delve into why Jungkook would say this to him of all people. He feels two gazes piercing through the side of his head and when he looks up, he finds Jungkook and Hyuna glaring at him.

Taehyung — begrudgingly — subdues.

"What a disrespectful boy you are," Hyuna tuts.

"Right? He's always like that," Jungkook laments.

"A pity for such lovely eyes and assets." Hyuna's eyes trail down Taehyung's form.

Jungkook heavily sighs as he nods in agreement.

A heat crawls up Taehyung's tense neck.

"He's a prick but he has his charms."

"*He* is growing impatient," Taehyung snips. "Hurry it up."

Jungkook rolls his eyes but *finally* tilts his head back as the flower turns into a red, blood-like liquid in his hands that he begins to drink. The sight is disturbing, but the Prince doesn't seem too agitated by the flower he's consuming. His hands lower moments later, dry and unstained, his tongue darting out to lick over his lower lip.

Taehyung waits. The curiosity turns into trepidation as a minute elapses in silence. "So?"

"I feel normal," Jungkook shrugs. "Not dizzy or strange."

"Good," Hyuna says as she inspects the content of the pouch's endless bottom.

Taehyung does not waste a second to grab Jungkook by the arm and tug him out of this green room to walk toward a corner of the bedroom. "The ring."

"What are you two hiding?" Hoseok wonders and tries to peep over Jungkook's shoulder.

"No offense, but this is between the Viper and I." Taehyung presses a palm on the wall, both caging Jungkook in the corner while shielding him from any prying eyes.

Seokjin and Hoseok are unaware of Jungkook's necromancy. As far as the two bespoke tailors are concerned, the group is looking for a way to decipher general ancient arcanes.

"Can you wait over there?" Taehyung asks and nods to the side, which is more of a demand, really. Hoseok walks away, not without a suspicious look that Taehyung ignores. When Taehyung peers back at Jungkook, the latter's gaze is settled on him. "What?"

"Nothing," Jungkook shakes his head. He shuffles closer to Taehyung, his shoulder blades bumping against Taehyung's extended arm. He presses on the ring's gem and begins to open the paper.

Before Jungkook can read any compromising information regarding Taehyung, the latter snatches the note, unfolds it and burns the list of his breaths before giving it back.

"Prick," Jungkook pouts.

Taehyung reads the column of listed arcanes.

It's the same list they've grown accustomed to, aside from a new nature related arcane added to it. According to the note, the nature one is, as Hyuna had promised, one that allows the removal of a spell cast on a person's body. The letters of the unknown arcane — the tracker's — seem to be slowly fading away, not as jet black as the rest of the ink.

Taehyung grabs a burnt corner of the paper to lift it closer to his eyes, Jungkook's hand coming with it. "Hmm… Seems like the warlock wasn't lying."

Jungkook clears his throat. "Yes. It seems like it. I should be fine, if so."

Taehyung exhales through his nose. The agitation in him lessens.

"That sounded relieved. Were you worried?"

Taehyung barks out a laugh.

As if.

He burns the entirety of the paper and swivels around. “Let’s check with the ring again in an hour to see if it continues to fade.”

“Satisfied with my work, angels?” Hyuna inquires.

“For now. We’ll be certain in two hours,” Taehyung says.

“We’re *very* much satisfied,” Jungkook corrects with a warning look at Taehyung. “Thank you. It appears to be working already.”

“If the tracker remains on you,” Hyuna begins and crosses the distance to hand Jungkook a leaf with an address written on it, “here. This is a one time trip to this house. All you have to do is speak out loud the address, and you will be immediately transported here along with anyone one you hold onto.”

Jungkook takes the leaf and tucks it in a pocket. “Thank you so much.”

“You are more than welcome, pretty angel,” Hyuna smiles and pats Jungkook’s cheek. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“Nothing else,” Hoseok answers.

“Actually,” Jungkook interjects, preceding Taehyung, “do you perhaps know if there is any sort of library here? There is some research we would like to make regarding, uhm… You know.”

Hyuna chuckles. “I see.”

“And we would like to be able to decipher certain kinds of arcanes as well. Is that something you can do?”

“I cannot.”

“I already know a library that can help us,” Hoseok says, already halfway out the door.

“It doesn’t hurt to have another,” Jungkook counters. There’s an irked edge in his timber, his gaze steeled.

“Sure thing,” Hoseok says and leans against the doorway.

After scribbling on a piece of parchment, Hyuna gives the paper to Hoseok. “You can take them there. Tell the old man that you were sent by me. He will help you. He’s quite the sour man, a bit like this one,” she adds with a wink at Taehyung, “but much worse. He has close to no patience, so be to the point in what you need.”

“Thank you so much for your help, Hyuna. You’re saving us a lot of time,” Jungkook reiterates.

“Yeah, thank you,” Hoseok grins, but his smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“We should go,” Taehyung notes, then makes his way toward the exit door. “Does the word ‘primordial’ ring any bell?”

Hyuna muses for a while. “I can’t say it does.”

“That’s fine. Thank you again!” Jungkook and Taehyung both come to a halt as the group of naked people from before enter the room. “Oh God.” Jungkook rushes out of the bedroom.

The three of them exit the place, their departure trailed by giggles and moans that Taehyung grimaces at.

Once outside of the brothel, Taehyung breathes in a gulp of not so fresh air. He then turns toward Hoseok and fires a “What’s up with you?”

Hoseok’s head darts toward Taehyung. “What?”

“Everything’s fine?”

“Yeah. I’m a little tense knowing that so many of us are down there. You and I are taking quite a lot of risks.”

“I know, but the others are together just like we are. They’ll be fine. And Hyuna seems to have been telling the truth, so the tracker is one less matter to be concerned about.”

“I know.” Hoseok's smile is more genuine this time. “We should hurry to the library.”

"I th—" Jungkook doesn't get to finish his sentence when he trips forward. Taehyung’s hand flies to catch the Prince and steady him on his feet. “Sorry, I’m a little dizzy.”

Taehyung says nothing. Instead, he grabs the Prince’s wrist to place the hand on his arm, a silent permission that Jungkook understands because he curls his arm around Taehyung’s, leaning his weight against him.

Taehyung slows down their pace as they continue their path through Eden.

“It’s this one.”

An hour has passed, according to Taehyung’s watch.

The group has been trudging through the market, pausing here and there when Taehyung and Jungkook stumble on an oddity that catches their interest.

Taehyung is particularly obnoxious about it, trying his damnedest to not tinker with a glowing cup or a bracelet adorned with a plethora of precious gems cut in shapes of teeth, his child-like elation at being surrounded by so many different arcanes vibrating to life.

“You’ll be fine if I leave you alone for a few minutes? I have to visit someone real quick,” Hoseok explains.

“Yeah, we’ll wait here if you’re not back when you’re done,” Taehyung says.

“Deal! See you in a few,” Hoseok exclaims and walks off.

“Is he okay?”

Taehyung shrugs at Jungkook. “He said he’s tense since he’s supposed to keep us safe.”

Jungkook hums, peering at the point where Hoseok disappeared.

“What?”

“It's probably just in my head."

“And?”

Jungkook’s hand slides underneath the cloak to most likely close around the ruby. “Lovely has been especially angsty since we woke up. I don’t know why, and she doesn’t know why either, but it’s getting to me. It’s just… Something feels off? I don’t know how to explain.”

“I feel it too,” Taehyung confesses. It’s reassuring to know his restlessness may have a rational reason for once.

“Really?”

“I don’t know why either. Something’s been bothering me but I can’t pinpoint what, exactly.”

“We should tell Hoseok. Maybe,” Jungkook backtracks. “I know he’s your friend, and I’ve seen how nice he is when he was tailoring my garments for the wedding, but I don’t trust him as much as I trust you.”

“And how much do you trust me?” Taehyung asks with an arched brow.

“About this much.” Jungkook pinches his index and thumb so close that they almost touch.

Taehyung zaps Jungkook. “Fuck off."

Jungkook bursts into laughter as they enter the library.

The building is one of the highest ones they have encountered in Eden so far.

Taehyung understands why when he contemplates the high ceilings endlessly stretching above his head. The bookshelves are just as high, towering over the ground and packed with rows of books. The dust is what catches his attention next, the particles piled up in every nook and crannies.

He and Jungkook squeeze their way through the path littered with heaps of books precariously piled together. They eventually manage to reach the reception counter.

Taehyung rings the call bell.

“Speak.”

Taehyung and Jungkook jolt on their spot.

Taehyung glances around, looking for the source of the abrupt voice but finding neither the shop owner or other visitors.

Jungkook leans over the counter to peer behind it. “Oh.”

Taehyung mirrors him.

A small man of perhaps four feet tall is sitting on the floor, a book larger than him opened and floating in front of him. His medium length, white hair is neatly slicked back on his head, his garment pristine and impeccably ironed out, a dichotomy to the mess surrounding him.

The old man's head twists around, his glasses catching the light of the lanterns hovering the shop. He springs to his feet and he snatches a step stool from somewhere that he slams on the floor. He climbs it, settling to Taehyung and Jungkook's eye level. "*Speak*."

"Hyuna sent us. We're looking for books related to necromancy," Jungkook shoots.

"Necromancy," the old man echoes, stroking his full beard.

"Yes."

The old man jumps down the step stool and runs off.

Taehyung and Jungkook don't have to wait long before the shop owner comes back. However, the old man begins to talk.

And talk some more.

The rambling is eternal, and for someone who supposedly has little patience, the old man loves to go on and on *and on* about whatever the hell he's talking about. Taehyung can't even decipher what the man is saying. The words are too rapid and jumbled together to make any lick of sense.

Nevertheless, *Taehyung's* own patience is running thin. He has half a mind to vacate the library when its owner finally stops.

"Here," the old man gruffly says and slides the book he had brought toward Jungkook. "It's the only book I have about necromancy. The rest is useless."

"Thank you." Jungkook grabs the tome and stills. His gaze flits on the old man. The two of them appear to have some sort of muted, secret conversation.

"The fuck is happening?" Taehyung snaps.

"You're a necromancer," the old man states, staring at Jungkook whose mouth opens around a noncommittal sound. "Don't try to deny it."

Jungkook's evident wariness is reflected by Taehyung who preemptively goes through his roulette. "Why do you think that?"

"This book is infused with necromancy. You reacted to it. Open it."

Jungkook does. The pages are blank. "What does it do?"

"No clue," the old man sniffs. Taehyung glares at him. "I'm not a necromancer! How would I know?! Kids these days... Get out of my sight!"

"But we haven't paid y—"

“Pay me by coming back here and showing me what you find out about this book."

“But—”

“Thank you,” Taehyung says with a tight lip smile. He rushes outside, pulling Jungkook with him.

They stumble on Hoseok as they come out. “Follow me,” Hoseok beckons without preamble, guiding them to a deserted alley. “I found someone who can lead us to another guy who knows something regarding the word ‘primordial’.”

“Knows what?”

“First guy said the one we have to meet knows about the ‘primordial stone’,” Hoseok quotes.

Taehyung and Jungkook both gawk at Hoseok.

None of them has ever mentioned anything about the word ‘stone' preceding 'primordial'. Whoever the other guy is may have access to crucial information.

Jungkook’s thoughts must be driven on a similar train because he nods at Taehyung.

“That could help or nah?” Hoseok wonders.

“Is the guy human?” Taehyung entirely trusts Hoseok, but he’d rather prepare in advance.

“No. He’s a dragonborn.”

Taehyung sighs in relief. “He could help a lot. We need to talk to him as soon as possible.”

“I told him we’d meet up right now."

Taehyung checks his watch. “We have ten minutes left to get to the meeting point above, thirty with the additional twenty, but I’d rather avoid that. We should reconvene with the others before we meet your guy.”

Hoseok winces. “Yeaaah, I don’t think it’ll work out if we don’t go right away. He’s not a patient man at all and hates when people don’t stick to their words. He has a lot of connections, so I don’t want to piss him off since he's helped me before."

Taehyung mulls over his friend’s arguments.

They could visit the guy now, but it might take longer than the thirty minutes Taehyung and the rest of the group had agreed on.

“What do you think?” Jungkook says.

Taehyung meets Jungkook’s gaze. “What do *you* think?”

“It’s the first time we get close to having some tangible news about the primordial matter. The man knows it’s a stone, which is more than most people are aware of, but going without the others could be risky.”

“But…” Taehyung trails off.

“But it should be fine if we’re quick,” Jungkook muses, voicing Taehyung's conclusion.

“Was thinking the same."

“Everything should be fine!” Hoseok grins, which does *not* reassure Taehyung one bit.

“Should?”

“As I said, he’s not patient. The longer dilly-dally, the less inclined to help he’ll be.”

“We should hurry, then,” Jungkook says, and Taehyung nods.

The three of them exit the alley, Hoseok at the head of the group.

After passing by roads and entering a neglected apartment building, they halt in front of a door watched by two bulky guards. They’re allowed through the entrance at a word from Hoseok, only to arrive inside a room completely devoid of furniture, saved for the purple door facing them. It’s made of wood, with runes engraved on it.

“What’s that?” Taehyung asks.

“A dimension door,” Hoseok clarifies. “It’ll lead us inside a shed.”

Hoseok opens the door and steps through it. Taehyung and Jungkook glance at each other, then pass the door's threshold.

“Why are they still not here?” Jimin grumbles, concern rising in him.

They left Eden half an hour ago, and the second group hasn’t arrived yet.

“I don’t know but it’s starting to worry me,” Namjoon says. “Jungkook would usually be there already.”

“In two minutes, we’ll pass the additional twenty minutes, so we should wait for those to elapse,” Yoongi says. “If by then they’re still not there, we’ll go look for them. It’d be risky to split out more than we are.”

Jimin paces around. He can't shake off this sense of something being wrong. What if Taehyung is in danger?

Seokjin, ever relaxed, pats Jimin’s shoulder. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

Jimin shrugs off Seokjin’s hand and continues his back and forth. “I’m telling you something’s wrong. I can feel it. Taehyung should be there already too. He’s a punctual maniac. He's never late unless he’s being an ass.”

“Eden is a peculiar place,” Seokjin says, who had been guiding them for the past three hours, aside from that one time where he had to leave them on their own for a moment. “It’s easy to lose track

of time.”

“I’m not asking whether you agree or not with me." Jimin walks up to Seokjin and he can’t repress his fire breath when it flickers out of his mouth. “I’m *telling* you something is off, alright? I swear to the Elders if something happened to him again—” He doesn’t finish his sentence, his vocal chords tightening. He knows he’s being unfairly callous toward his friend but can't bring himself to care when Taehyung’s safety may be endangered.

It wouldn’t be the first time that Jimin would be near a fright attack because he’d be unable to find Taehyung, only to stumble on him in the forest, safe and sound.

“We need to look for them. Now."

“We should wait a little longer, Jimin,” Namjoon says. “Seokjin is right. We’ve seen it ourselves. It’s easy to lose track of time and get swept away with anything and everything once below.”

Jimin’s nose curls around a snarl, the arcane in his breath pouch wildly coiling. “No. Fuck this and you. I’m going.” He turns around to walk toward the entrance of the black market when a hand grips his elbow.

“I know you’re worried, I am too, but—”

Jimin turns to face Yoongi. “You don’t seem to understand that I will tear your fucking hand from your arm if you don’t let go of me. I’m going. You don’t know shit about me or Taehyung.”

“Acting rashly when they may be on their way here won’t be of any help,” Yoongi reasons. “Even if, and that is a big if, but even *if* something happened to either of them, we need to think and plan. We can’t simply barge down there and demand answers. This is not how Eden works.”

“Fuck.” Jimin wrenches his arm from Yoongi’s grasp. “Fuck!” He kicks at a large rock that implodes into pieces, one of them flying by his head. “Fucking shit.” He drops down on the ground to sit crossed legs. “What time s'it?”

“2:13 pm.”

“How about we wait until 3 pm?” Seokjin proposes, and Jimin is about to yell about how mental that is but Seokjin carries on. “If the others aren’t back by then, I could bring us to a friend who will give us a hand in finding the other three.”

“That’ll be an hour after the minimum waiting time, and forty minutes with the additional twenty. If they’re busy underground, an hour is more than enough time for them to reconvene here considering how huge Eden is,” Yoongi agrees.

“Fuck.” Jimin covers his face with his hands, fighting back the tremors in them and the stinging in his eyes.

He wouldn’t be able to handle anything happening to Taehyung again, however he reassures himself with what his friends and Jungkook’s have been saying.

Taehyung is most likely fine. Just late.

Jimin peeks through his fingers when something bumps his shin. He looks down and observes the miniature baby dragon made of ink that waddles toward him. Jimin huffs a chuckle when the

hatchling stumbles on its own wing and falls face first.

Jimin drops his hands and peers up, catching Yoongi's kind smile.

The door swings open inside a small, wood shed.

"Let's hurry it up," Hoseok ushers, an urgency in his steps.

"When you say the guy isn't patient, will he try to trap us into some kind of awful deal if we're late?" Taehyung wonders as he steps out of the shed.

"Nah. He'll be pissed but I'll be the one on the receiving end," Hoseok chuckles. "Don't worry."

They walk through a garden that is well kept, the grass neatly trimmed.

There's a manor ahead of them, large and towering over the empty field. There's nothing else in its immediate vicinity, aside from the canopy that stretches across the horizon.

Taehyung wonders how far the manor is for it to require a door to reach it.

Jungkook's grip tightens around Taehyung's arm. "The bad feeling is growing."

"I know, me too. The leaf?"

"It's in my hand. I memorized the address already. If anything goes wrong or if you ask me, I'll say it."

Taehyung hopes it'll suffice as an escape route. "Worst case scenario, I can turn and fly us away, so stay close and be prepared."

"Got it." Jungkook presses himself further against Taehyung's side.

The three of them climb up the perron, the double doors wide open. They enter the manor where guards, maids and more people are bustling around. They're humans, not a single dragonborn in sight. The manor's doors close behind them in a rumble that echoes through the large entrance hall.

The skin at the back of Taehyung's neck prickles.

He halts and slings an arm over Jungkook's chest.

Hoseok pauses too. His lips are curled when he turns around.

It's different from any other smile the man has ever drawn. This one has a hint of selfish pride in it, heightened by his intent gaze.

"Say, Hoseok," Jungkook starts, "what's the code?"

"Nixes," Hoseok answers without missing a beat.

That doesn't alleviate Taehyung's unease.

Hoseok wouldn't betray Taehyung, right? It wouldn't make sense. They've been friends for years; Taehyung has helped Hoseok a lot throughout their friendship, and vice versa.

Hoseok wouldn't betray Taehyung, but then again, another man Taehyung had thought the same thing about *had* torn apart their trust.

Taehyung doesn't get to contemplate for much longer, let alone speak a word.

Hoseok's face morphs. The bone structure alters under his skin: the cheekbones, the jaw, the nose's bridge. His stature changes as well, gaining in height and width. The clothes are next.

Then, the scent.

Of putrid coal and mint.

"I have missed you, my dove."

The first ten minutes pass rather quickly. Jimin distracts himself by playing with Yoongi's ink hatchling.

Ten more minutes elapse.

And another.

"I told you," Jimin roars and surges up when the time on Yoongi's watch reaches 2:45 p.m. "I told you something's wrong!"

No one is listening to Jimin. Namjoon and Yoongi are conversing together, planning what their next move will be. A flurry of ravens burst out of Yoongi's hands, trailed by a command. "Jungkook. Taehyung. Find them."

Jimin is about to turn to his dragon counterpart when his gaze lands on Seokjin. The latter is smiling as he surveys the rest of the group.

His and Jimin's gaze meet.

Jimin's fury flares up. "What's so fucking funny?!"

"It worked as he had planned, as always," Seokjin chuckles.

"What?"

A puddle of ink rushes past Jimin, and like it had with Taehyung after the wedding, tendrils erupt from it to pierce onto the ground and trap Seokjin.

Seokjin's smile grows eerie. His hand shakes as it lifts in front of his mouth, his index finger and thumb forming an 'O'.

Jimin sees the fire swirling in Seokjin's mouth, aimed toward Yoongi.

The hard soil breaks underneath Jimin's shoes when he pushes on his legs to race toward Yoongi. He crashes onto the warlock, his arms curling around him to shove him out of the way. The cone of fire narrowly misses them as they roll across the ground.

"Yoongi!"

Jimin springs up and swivels around.

Seokjin is no more. Instead, a woman stands where Seokjin had once been, and it all makes sense now: the way 'Seokjin' had them take twists and turns, stop at this or that shop, make them waste time while Taehyung—

"What have you done to Taehyung?!"

The woman laughs. The ink vibrates until it splatters on the ground. A creature, large and round with a protective skin seemingly made of stone appears in a gust of purple wind. She deftly leaps on it and the creature begins to fly somehow, floating in the air as it carries the warlock above the canopy.

Jimin turns into his dragon counterpart and recklessly chases after her. A giant raven flies by his sides.

The woman has a second familiar, Jimin notices amidst the rage that blurs his vision. It's a lizard, poised on her head. The first familiar opens its mouth, a purple door spat out of it that opens.

"May we meet again, Park Jimin," the woman says.

Jimin's claws swipe through the air as the door vanishes, the woman gone with it. He hovers in the sky for a moment, staring ahead, his guts wrenching and twisting.

"Jimin!"

Jimin snaps out of his stupor to dive where Yoongi and Namjoon are. A rustle of leaves erupts amidst the trees on his left. He marches toward it, standing in front of Yoongi and Namjoon, a low growl rumbling through him.

Seokjin appears.

If it is Seokjin.

Jimin doesn't know. He's not certain of anything anymore, and so he summons his breath that boils in his throat.

"Jimin, it's me," Seokjin pants and raises his palms in a fruitless effort to placate Jimin. "It's me. I promise. Ask me a question only you and I know the answer to."

This could be a bait, Jimin thinks. But he shifts back to human anyway, ready to charge the second the Seokjin facing him moves a single finger.

“What did I give you during winter four years ago?”

“You made me pins for my sewing kit. Each pin’s head was in the shape of a dragon’s head,” Seokjin rapidly says.

“Fuck.” Jimin’s breathing picks up. “I don’t understand wh—”

Hoseok appears behind Seokjin then, expression pained and riddled with guilt.

Horror dawns on Jimin.

“No. No…” Jimin staggers backward. The plummeting in his chest worsens. The sickness that rises at the back of his throat suffocates him. He falls to his knees, unable to remain upright any longer.

Taehyung’s gone.

Taehyung is frozen in place.

His mind can’t comprehend what is happening but it doesn’t matter. All that does is surviving and running and *fly fly fly —*

Taehyung immediately turns into a dragon, his form breaking through the ceiling and walls. There’s a gasp below him and he watches as Jungkook shakes his hand, the leaf — *their escape* — burnt to ashes by someone's fireball.

Taehyung grabs Jungkook in his talon.

There’s an incessant ringing in his mind, muffling the sounds around him as he ascends.

He stares down at the manor, at where the man with the scent stands amidst the rubble. Taehyung’s heart wildly trashes, something painful and desperate. The staccato his throat makes when he goes through the roulette of his breaths breaks through the roaring between his ears. The arrow slots on the fire breath. Taehyung opens his mouth and—

“Taehyung! Get down!”

The cone of fire dies in Taehyung's throat at Jungkook’s warning. He ducks under a dragon’s ball of fire aimed his way and he doesn’t get the chance to retaliate before a second dragon slams onto his side.

Taehyung crashes down over several yards. His talon knocks against the ground. Jungkook falls from its grasp. Taehyung scrambles on his fore and back limbs as he glances at the two dragons flying toward him. Then his gaze settles on Jungkook who’s laid on his stomach, his eyes closed and blood trickling down from his temple.

Taehyung has to leave.

He can’t stay.

He can't help.

He can't risk his life for Jungkook. Taehyung knows what will happen if he does not run away *right now* but if he leave then Jungkook will—

A door materializes on his left, similar to the one in the shed. A woman walks through it.

Taehyung's wings move, his talons leaving the ground they were anchored into.

A song floats through the quietude.

Taehyung lands on the ground again. He doesn't know why he does, because he should leave, right?

But why?

He has forgotten why he should run.

Taehyung remembers being afraid, however it now feels like a distant memory, so he stays where he is.

A lizard is sitting on the woman's head. The creature's mouth is opened and...

Oh.

This is where the soothing melody comes from. It's calming, so much so that it lulls Taehyung. He's so tired all of a sudden. He has had a long day, after all. So Taehyung lays on the ground. He doesn't have anything to fear here, he thinks and watches Jungkook whose eyes are wide open, boring onto Taehyung.

Why would Jungkook be scared? Everything's fine, and Taehyung is sleepy.

His vision is hazy.

His lids fall shut, and complete darkness envelops him.

"Is he asleep?"

"Nay. This song works on dragonborns only. Is he dead though?"

A sigh. "No, thankfully. I need him alive for the deal," a man says, and Jungkook immediately recognizes the voice.

Jungkook does not open his eyes when he discreetly takes his dagger and Yoongi's ring from his pocket, along with a rolled piece of paper. Revna slithers out of the ruby, between Jungkook's chest and the ground, just enough for her to grab the dagger and ring in her mouth and revert back inside the ruby.

Now Jungkook can only hope that the person behind the attack won't have any means to verify if the necklace is arcanic or not.

He groans, pretending to awaken. His lids flutter open.

"Oh, hello." A woman crouches in front of Jungkook. She unfastens the buckles of his mask and tosses it behind her shoulder. Taehyung's dragon self isn't there anymore. "The prince of Amaris is as pretty as the tales say. I wonder for how long that'll be the case."

Hands yanks on Jungkook's cloak. A dull throe throbs on his cheek. He trips over himself when he's dragged toward the manor that appears to have rebuilt itself while he had been passed out.

Jungkook can't run away. The two dragons would catch up to him in no time. He can't contact anyone either. He doesn't have one of Yoongi's ravens with him. He can't do anything for now. So he keeps his head down as he memorizes the corridors and turns they take, drawing a map of the manor in his mind. It probably won't matter, but he needs to focus on something. He can't afford to give into the fear.

Not now.

Not when Taehyung is gone.

Jungkook and the two guards framing him enter a room whose doors are closed shut behind them. A shoe kicks him at the back of his legs. He falls on his knees with a hiss.

Jungkook hunches over himself from where he's sitting on the ground. He closes his eyes.

Then, he begins.

His body trembles under the tremors of the sobs that start to leave his mouth. He clasps his hands together, keeping his head down, forehead pressed on the cold floor. The cut on his cheek stings. "P—Please. Please, don't hurt me, please."

"The tales never mentioned how pathetic Amaris' Prince is, however," the woman laments.

"Hopefully my dove won't be as angsty. I have missed him."

The tears easily slide down Jungkook's cheeks as he lifts his head to peer up at Dohyun. He doesn't overdo it, just enough for it to be a natural reaction given the circumstances. Jungkook has to make himself look as non threatening as he can. Be meager and pathetic.

Weak .

Sounds of rattling chains erupt on his left. His head darts toward it.

Taehyung is unconscious and tugged away by two guards, head hung low. The guards stop at Dohyun's command.

Dohyun holds onto Taehyung's chin. A smile curls his lip. "My precious dove…" Dohyun croons and caresses Taehyung's cheek.

A shiver runs down Jungkook's spine.

“Take care of him until I do," Dohyun instructs. "Lift a single finger on him and your arm will be gone.”

“Understood, boss,” the guards both say in unison.

“Go on,” Dohyun waves them off.

The guards resume their trip, disappearing behind a wall with Taehyung.

Dohyun sits down on a chair tucked against a table, the living room on the right side of the place.

Jungkook had questioned at the wedding why a mere human like Dohyun can terrify Taehyung so much, and he still does at present.

Dohyun looks friendly and approachable, for lack of a better word, like the kind of man who heals and loves rather than hurts and hates. His features are welcoming, the black hair neatly styled and framing his temples. He’s wearing a checkered, beige suit, and when he smiles, it's kind.

Dohyun rests an elbow on the table, crossing a leg over the other. “What should I do with you while waiting?”

“Don’t hurt me,” Jungkook quietly cries. “Please. I’ll do anything you want.”

Dohyun supports his head in his palm. “Pleading for yourself but not for your husband? How expected, yet disappointing.”

A tendril of anger flickers in Jungkook that he tames down. “I just—” He pauses and sniffles. “What do you want?”

“I already have what I want,” Dohyun answers.

So Taehyung *is* the goal of all that has gone down.

“Then I—”

“I still remember you shunning me from your wedding. It had been as entertaining as it had been enlightening.” Dohyun rises on his feet and Jungkook incites a flinch through his form. Dohyun chuckles with a tilt of his head, hands in his trousers’ pockets as he approaches Jungkook. “This is all a play for you, is it not?”

“Uh?”

“An act.” Dohyun halts a foot away. He looks down at Jungkook. “The sniveling, the quivering… The sobbing.”

“I don’t understand.”

Dohyun crouches in front of him, arms on his knees. The motion carries a waft of mint. “I saw it in your eyes when you watched me leave at the wedding. They held waters as stormy and virulent as mine, yet harnessed by carefully crafted walls. People should fear you. This, in particular.” Dohyun’s right hand slowly raises.

Jungkook’s heart beats in his throat, however unlike anything he’s expecting, Dohyun simply taps a finger on Jungkook’s forehead.

“Your mind should be feared.” Dohyun's index finger trails to Jungkook’s temple as he cups the cheek. His thumb settles at the corner of Jungkook’s eyes and he says “Fake.” He wipes a falling tear next. “Fake.” Then, his finger settles above Jungkook’s trembling lips. “Fake, particularly what comes out of it.”

Jungkook's trembling hands ball up on his thighs. Being scared never helps, as he had come to learn. And so he falls quiet. The tears stop. His face smooths to indifference. His gaze locks with Dohyun's.

“There he is.” Dohyun smiles. “The true Amaris’ Prince.” He retracts his hand to bring his thumb to his mouth, biting on his nail. “What should I do,” he hums through a smile. “I want to play with you. You’d entertain me well when my dove is resting.”

It’s only now that dread truly kindles in Jungkook.

This man is dangerous, he understands at once. There's a cruelty swimming in Dohyun's eyes, deceptively hidden beneath a veneer of friendliness. Jungkook thinks of Taehyung then, of what he may have gone through under Dohyun.

It’s cold inside, yet perspiration blooms on Jungkook’s neck, a drop sliding down his temple.

“Remember the deal, Dohyun,” the woman interjects. “And our deal.”

Dohyun looks up at her when she whizzes past him, her dress swirling behind her. “I know, Yumi. I simply want to amuse myself.”

Yumi plops on a chair. “Not too much.”

Dohyun smiles then straightens up before addressing the rest of his men populating the room. “Be careful of him. Don’t let him be near anything.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Prepare for the collect as well. Bring boxes and leather bags, along with the required equipment. I must also express my... Concern of a potential repeat of what had once occurred with my previous guards. I do not wish to see Taehyung bear a touch or wound that is not mine.” The guards’ postures tense up. “Oh, and prepare a cell for Amaris’ Prince. Make it comfortable. We can’t have our esteemed guest freeze to death before he leaves.”

Leave?

Jungkook observes Dohyun’s men scurry around as they exit the room. A realization pops in his mind. “You never went to see anyone, did you? *You* were the other guy.”

“Indeed,” Dohyun confirms and strides toward the dining table where a tea set is deposited by a maid. “I needed a reason to be alone for a moment.”

“Then how do you know about the primordial stone?”

Dohyun sits down on his chair. “I have my ways.”

“What kind of ways?” Jungkook hisses when something hard hits one of his shoulders.

“You speak too much,” one of the guards reprimands.

“It’s fine. I’m entertained,” Dohyun dismisses.

For how long, Jungkook worries.

It’s straightforward with Seungwon who’s a predictable simpleton. The dragonborn’s violence is one that is easy to foresee, and even easier to avoid for Jungkook. However Dohyun unnerves Jungkook like no other being or lost soul ever has.

“What kind of ways?” Jungkook presses. Maybe being his brazen self will satiate Dohyun’s evident love for diversions until Jungkook manages to find a way out.

“Knowing the right people."

Seohyung and Sungmin? Why would they ally with Dohyun, however? They’d gain nothing from it, as far as Jungkook is aware. Moreover the Queen and King hadn't shown any kind of unusual reaction when Jungkook had demanded Dohyun's departure from the after-party.

“Watching your mind trying to unravel each of my words is fascinating,” Dohyun chuckles. “If I wasn't already taken by my dove, I would keep you. I might.”

“*Dohyun*,” Yumi groans. Her lizard dances between her fingers as she plays with it.

“I know, I know.” Dohyun waves her off. He grabs one of the pastries deposited next to the tea set and munches on it with a happy sound. “Those are delicious." Yumi also partakes in the snacking.

Jungkook's throat clicks when he swallows. “What will you do with Taehyung?”

Dohyun pauses amidst a bite, and the sight would be comical if Jungkook had not seen first hand the damage Dohyun has left on Taehyung’s mind years later. His eyes close around a smile. “Would you like to see?”

No, Jungkook thinks, but he needs to know if Taehyung is still alive. So he nods.

Jungkook tries to placate Revna down as much as he can, however she craves to come out and lunge at Dohyun, have her venom be the most potent it has ever been when she bites.

“I could perhaps take you with me to see him later on. For now, however, I want to enjoy my reunion with my dove alone. Take the Prince to his room." Dohyun stands and begins to leave.

“Wait! Wait, please, let me—” Jungkook bites down on his tongue when another hit aches on his spine. Dohyun turns to look at him. “Let me see him, please. Just once.”

Dohyun seems pensive as he observes Jungkook for a moment, then he says “No. Not yet.”

Jungkook is pulled on his feet by his hair while Dohyun walks away.

“You should shut your fucking mouth if you want to live to see another day,” one of the guards warns.

Jungkook is patted down by two other guards who strip him and pockets from anything he may have been holding, leaving him in his pants and a shirt. When they reach his necklaces, panic rises in him. Thankfully, they discard them after inspecting the jewelry for a brief moment.

Handcuffs are next, tightly fastened around his wrists, and it’s accompanied by a metal collar, the lot linked with chains.

Jungkook examines the bindings.

He can’t see any runes on them.

Jungkook stumbles when he’s pushed forward, walking in the same direction Dohyun had taken. He keeps an ear out for any sounds or voices. There might be some souls roaming the manor that may be able to aid him, although he has yet to see one.

A door opens in front of him that leads to descending stairs.

He and the guards soon walk through a hallway in the basement.

There’s nothing unusual about the underground aside from the runes covering the walls and doors. It smells humid and stale, the ambient coldness clinging onto Jungkook like a second skin. Cell doors line the wall, made of metal and with only a thin rectangular slit at the middle closed by a small trap.

Dohyun is ahead of Jungkook, facing a cell. He retrieves a necklace from underneath his dress shirt from where a key dangles. A click resounds through the silence when he unlocks the cell and he steps inside.

Jungkook walks by, just in time to see an unconscious Taehyung tied to a chair.

“My precious dove,” Dohyun sighs, and closes the door behind him.

Jungkook peers ahead, and this time the tremors aren’t forged.

The rest of the walk passes in a blur.

One moment he’s staring at Taehyung, and the next he’s thrown into his own cell as he falls onto the ground. He hears the click of his door being locked, then the footsteps of the guards walking away.

The only light in the cell comes from two lanterns buried high up on the wall on each side of the door and tucked behind a protective glass.

Jungkook sits on his knees and lowers himself on his forearms. He blinks to chase away the fog dimming his vision. He deeply inhales and exhales, attempting to ignore the memories that flash in his mind.

Alone and cold, eyes prickling with unshed tears, Jungkook's breath catches in his throat when he's hit by the nightmare the day has veered into.

He can't run away when he has no idea of how far he and Taehyung are from Eden, and he would never leave Taehyung behind anyway. He also can't allow Revna out either in the fear of what may be done to her if she's found.

He doesn't know what to do.

“God…”

Jungkook rests his forehead on his arms and he can’t repress his silent cries as he curls in on himself. He can’t begin to imagine what may occur to himself.

To Taehyung.

“At least you’re here,” Jungkook whispers to Revna. She wants to come out but he refuses. “They can’t know about you. Could be worse if they do.”

Jungkook brings his left hand to his ear. He listens.

Thunder distantly cracks in the ring’s diamond, steady and regular, however much slower than usual.

“If I die, my arcane will obviously be gone, and with it the storm will be too.”

Jungkook clings onto those words that he had found distasteful at the wedding, yet brings him a sense of comfort now.

“The others will look for us. They must know we’re gone by now, but they don’t know where we are,” he speaks out loud, both to fill in the unnerving stillness and keep track of his reasoning. “I think this place is riddled with all sorts of runes and… Maybe— Maybe to hide this place from any sort of location spell? I recognized one of the runes. I think. It’s— Taehyung is—”

A lump swells in his throat.

“I don’t know... Dohyun’s gonna hurt him,” he croaks out, a sob crawling up his throat. “But we have to do something, okay? We have to find a way out.”

When he rises to his feet, his legs are wobbly, but he manages to remain standing. He wipes his cheeks no matter how fruitless it is with the tears that continue to fall down.

Jungkook marches toward the heavy metal door. He yanks on the rectangular trap but it does not budge. It can be opened from the other side.

He scans the cell.

All things considered, and in view of how this place is supposed to keep prisoners trapped, the room is quite well kept. Humidity is dense and some mold is tainting the corners of the walls, however it is somewhat cleaned. There’s a toilet on the left corner, a bed in the right upper corner with folded blankets on it.

Jungkook takes one and wraps it around himself.

Rattling of metal erupts not far from Jungkook's cell. On the left, right where Taehyung is being held. Some sounds of hitting trail after. Or of something dropping? Jungkook isn't sure. What he's certain of, however, is that footsteps echo louder and louder outside of his cell, soon stopping in front of it.

Wood scrapes across the floor's stones.

"How long are we gonna have to guard this one?" A man says.

"A few days. Boss said we can have our fun with him though, but nothing that leaves too much traces," another man adds.

Jungkook scorns.

"Could be fun."

"We've been needing some for the past years."

"I fucking know. Boss had been so damn on edge without his dove."

"He has him back now. We'll get to relax and do whatever the fuck we want again since he'll be busy."

Jungkook lays down on the mattress. He presses his back against the wall. It's cold, but it gives him a vague sense of safety. The guards keep talking, and Jungkook tunes them out.

A choked up yell rips through the conversation.

The guards quieten while Jungkook freezes.

Soon after, a strangled noise and some clanking of chains echo through the air. It comes from a few cells down behind Jungkook.

The noises are chased with a boisterous laugh, sounding happy.

Elated.

Then, a stifled sob. And hitting. Chains rattling. Intersected by words Jungkook can't decipher.

"He's starting early," a guard says.

"I don't think he has yet. He's probably just warming his dove up. You know how he is."

"Unfortunately."

Jungkook presses his palms against his ears, his entire body wracked with constant shudders. The storm in the ring does nothing to lessen the sounds coming from where Taehyung's cell is. He muffles his cries in the crook of his elbow as he listens to what may be done to Taehyung, his mind conjuring horrifying scenarios one after another.

There’s a routine.

It has been the exact same one for the past three days.

Jungkook wakes up. He’s given a bottle of water. Then the hours pass, slow and interminable, until the time that he guesses to be noon is reached. That’s when the guards enter the cell and pull Jungkook on his feet to escort him upstairs for lunch.

At first, Jungkook had refused to eat anything, out of childish spite, but also self-preservation. However his growling stomach had gotten the best of him, and he had caved at yesterday’s dinner.

Today is the same.

Jungkook eats, limited in his movements by the handcuffs still around his wrists. He’s settled at the long dining table along with over a dozen guards. They never talk to him aside from the two guards assigned to him.

He hasn’t seen Dohyun a second time. Taehyung’s cell has been quiet as well since the first day they’ve been kidnapped, to Jungkook’s relief. It means that Taehyung has been left alone, or that he’s sleeping, at the very least.

Jungkook hasn’t found any escape route. Even if he removes the handcuffs and somehow manages to lockpick his cell’s door, then what? Guards are everywhere, he's lost in the middle of nowhere, and Taehyung may be wounded.

A hand suddenly snatches Jungkook by the metal collar amidst his meal. He’s hauled and transported toward the room where he had first conversed with Dohyun.

The man in question is here, leaning against the back of an armchair. A second person is there, poised in another armchair. It’s a familiar man, and a fire blazes within Jungkook at the sight.

“Hello, Doll,” Seungwon says with a saccharine smile.

Jungkook jerks forward but he’s yanked backward and kicked at the back of his knees.

“We’ve been treating him well, as you requested. However he has yet to shower since he has arrived,” Dohyun says and Seungwon’s mouth twists. “You may clean him here if you wish.”

Dohyun and Seungwon chat together but Jungkook does not pay attention to it.

He’s confused and so, *so lost.*

Dohyun and Seungwon working together still doesn’t explain how Dohyun knows about the primordial stone, nor *why* he is allying with Seungwon. Seungwon must have helped in some ways, but with wha—

The tracker.

Jungkook startles when a boot painfully digs into his thigh.

“Get up,” Seungwon orders.

The guards make a move to grab Jungkook but they subdue at a look from Seungwon. Jungkook does not budge an inch. He bites back a wince when Seungwon yanks him up by the arm.

“You reek.” Seungwon curses then turns toward Dohyun. “Where’s your shower?”

“Can one of you guide him to one?” Dohyun asks and a guard nods.

Throughout the trip to the restroom, Seungwon’s hand travels from Jungkook’s arm to the nape. His fingers curl and squeeze in a painful grip.

“Don’t think I haven’t forgotten about the wedding,” Seungwon hisses in Jungkook’s ear. “You’ll regret humiliating me, but first…” He opens the bathroom door and steps inside. “Give me the handcuffs’ key."

“But boss said—”

“This one’s my doll. Whatever Dohyun said doesn’t apply to *me*,” Seungwon seethes. “Give me the fucking key.”

The guard complies. He rushes out at Seungwon’s dismissal, the door clicking shut on his exit.

Once Seungwon has removed the handcuffs and collar that fall onto the marble tiles, he shoves Jungkook under the shower head.

“Undress. Can’t stand that filth on you.”

Jungkook has to bore his nails into his palm to not thoughtlessly swivel around and plunge his dagger through Seungwon’s eye.

Jungkook removes his dirty shirt, pants and underwear. He turns the shower knob on. Seungwon contentedly hums behind him, and Jungkook can see in the reflection of the shower head the way Seungwon is watching him.

Getting rid of him has to wait, Jungkook thinks between gritted teeth.

Freeing Taehyung and himself is the priority.

As a result, Jungkook concentrates on cleaning the dirt, specks of blood and ambient filth from his skin. He’s used to being naked in front of others, and so he isn’t fazed much by Seungwon’s scrutiny.

“You’ll finally be mine again.”

“You can leash me, make me kneel before you, burn your marks on my skin all you want. I will never be yours, Seungwon." Jungkook slowly looks over his shoulder and smiles. "Taehyung's ring is the one I wear, after all."

Seungwon’s self-satisfied smile contorts around a glower. “Need a lot of training. We’ll work on that again. Wash yourself.”

Jungkook looks ahead and carries on with his task.

Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes later, the bindings are back around him, the chains knocking together as he walks inside what appears to serve as a meeting room. No guards are there. Dohyun and Yumi are the sole presences in the room.

Seungwon hauls Jungkook to an armchair and after slumping down on it, he grins, arrogant and spiteful. “Kneel.”

Jungkook narrows his attention on the prickling in his palms as he does as demanded.

Dohyun emits a long sigh. His head is lolled against his chair’s backrest, eyes closed. “I cannot believe I have my dove with me again after six years. Thank you for your help, Seungwon." Dohyun's eyes open. They're misty, brimming with gratefulness. “It was greatly appreciated.”

“Don’t make me wait next time."

“Sorry about that,” Dohyun chuckles. “I may have gotten lost reuniting with my dove. His absence had left a void in my life. Moreover,” he peers down at Jungkook, “Amaris’ Prince is captivating.”

Seungwon’s hand grips onto Jungkook’s nape. The curl to Dohyun's lips heightens. “Keep your fucking hands off my doll, Dohyun. He ain’t yours to play with.”

Dohyun’s expression opens around a faux air of offense as he places a hand over his heart. “I would never betray your trust. I find him interesting, is all.”

“Need to learn his damn place,” Seungwon snips and sways Jungkook from side to side. Jungkook can already feel the bruises the clamp will leave behind. Seungwon’s hand then flies upward to snatch a handful of Jungkook’s hair and yank his head back. “Ain’t that right, Doll?”

Jungkook mustn't repress his contempt well because the back of a hand painfully smacks across his cheek. Seungwon hasn’t held back much of his strength. A metallic taste suffuses Jungkook’s mouth, coating his tongue. He spits a glob of blood on the floor.

“Gonna have to train you to not look at me like that.” Seungwon uses his grip on Jungkook’s hair to shove his head down. “You used to be interesting, but you ain’t no more.”

Dohyun’s gaze flits between Seungwon and Jungkook as he sips on a cup of mint tea. “How so?”

“He used to be good to me when he was promised to me.” Seungwon releases his grip on Jungkook to recline in his chair. "But the vermin ruined it all.”

Dohyun hums, a noise that sounds half amused and half derisive. Jungkook expects him to make a remark about the pretense Jungkook has enacted earlier, but Dohyun changes the subject of the discussion.

Seungwon and Dohyun begin to converse together, a both nerve-wracking and infuriating spectacle.

Jungkook had once been scared of Seungwon, but it’s risible how immature Seungwon looks compared to Dohyun. How pathetic the dragonborn truly is. Yet there is something reliable in Seungwon's predictable that is absent with Dohyun.

“When will you be leaving?” Dohyun inquires. “You're more than welcome to extend your stay.”

“Six days, as we agreed,” Seungwon answers. “Got some business to attend to, and your warlock’s helpful.”

“The warlock has a name, reptile,” Yumi retorts from where she’s propped against her larger familiar.

“Now, now,” Dohyun placates them. “Let us keep in mind that we’re allies working together, shall we?”

“The work is done, so is the deal,” Yumi says.

“Not yet. Seungwon hired your services, and he would like to buy a pair,” Dohyun retorts.

Yumi huffs and continues to play with her lizard.

“How long will it take?” Seungwon wonders.

Dohyun places his cup on the coffee table. “You’ll have them at your departure in six days. I’d like to enjoy the next few days with my dove.”

Six days.

Jungkook has six days to find an escape before he’s forced to leave God knows where. Barely three days have passed, not enough time for Jungkook or Taehyung’s families to find them.

“Would you like to see my dove, Jungkook?” Dohyun offers.

"Fuck no," Seungwon interjects.

And so Jungkook shakes his head too, which takes aback the dragonborn.

Dohyun hums. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to see him hurt,” Jungkook answers, a half lie, half truth. His refusal may prompt Seungwon into action. After all, the man enjoys throwing Jungkook into situations Jungkook does not want to be in, especially if it can upset Jungkook and—

“I haven’t hurt him."

"The screams I heard were Taehyung's," Jungkook retorts in spite of his better judgment.

“It was a mere… punishment. Nothing too bad. However my dove has become quite sensitive since he left my nest.”

“I still don’t want to see him.” Jungkook prays that his plan works, that he has gotten to know Seungwon well enough.

“Well why not, actually?” Seungwon stands up, a callous grin crooking his face. “I said I’d train you. Could start with this. *I* want him to see the vermin.”

Bingo.

“Of course.” Dohyun rises as well. “However…” He reduces the distance between him and Seungwon, barely a foot separating them. When he speaks, his timber is *sinister*, embellished by his smile. “Careful how you address my dove, Seungwon. I don’t take kindly to those disrespecting him.”

Seungwon’s Adam's apple bobs up and down. There isn’t a sliver of scowl when he wordlessly nods.

“Excellent.”

Seungwon’s body stiffens when Dohyun pats his arm.

“Let us head to the basement," Dohyun says. "I have yet to move my dove upstairs.”

“I’ll sleep for a bit while the three of you have your fun,” Yumi yawns.

The pulsations of Jungkook’s heart speed up as Seungwon drags him up, the two of them following Dohyun down to the basement.

A couple minutes pass before the group stops in front of Taehyung’s cell.

The door has runes on it, however they differ from those on the other cells. They’re more abundant and have different shapes, a large one engraved at the center.

Akin to the three days ago, Dohyun uses the key slung around a necklace to unlock the door.

Jungkook’s fingers intertwine together in front of him. Revna springs into attention inside the ruby, her worry and anticipation echoing with his own. Jungkook’s throat clicks when he swallows. A cold sweat makes him shiver.

Dohyun steps aside once in the cell.

Taehyung is sitting shirtless on a back-less chair; his wrists, ankles and throat fastened by shackles. Those have runes, entirely covering them along with the chains that are attached on hooks on the ceiling and on the floor. His head is sagging forward, damp hair hiding his face from Jungkook's view.

Jungkook has seen plenty of horrors through the lost souls he has met, through their memories he has watched and read. So he has grown accustomed to dismembered limbs and cleaved heads. To fields of bodies and wars’ aftermath. To gruesome injuries worse than those lacerating Taehyung’s arms, Taehyung’s chest, Taehyung’s fingers, Taehyung's abdomen.

Taehyung’s everything.

The regular pit-a-pat of bloody drops splattering on stone echoes in the room, the only sound that pierces through the incessant buzz between Jungkook's ears.

Something rips open within him.

Perhaps it is his heart that seemingly stops beating for a moment. Perhaps it is one of his lungs, burning around the breath he cannot take. Or perhaps it is his mind, swathed by a conflicting storm of fury and resistance; hopelessness and surrender.

Dohyun smiles, his gaze darkened with a veil of contentment.

Taehyung is wounded and bleeding.

Jungkook's husband is.

And Jungkook silently cries, terror rendering him mute.

Chapter End Notes

!!Please read!! Saying again that SLB does NOT have any non-con/rape or implied non-con/rape AT ALL. Dohyun may be giving vibes that he would do something like this but he isn't that kind of character when it comes to this. Non-con/rape are heavy triggers and if it were to be in a story of mine it would be in the main tags/warnings right from the beginning and also before any concerned chapter, don't worry hehe. Dohyun is a horrible man but he has principles??? 😭 He would happily torture someone but he wouldn't ever sexually abuse them. You've got nothing to worry about on that concern 🤍!!

Have faith in me, Jungkook, Taehyung and the others 🙏 Remember that there is NO MCD (major character death) in this story, otherwise it'd be tagged from the beginning hehe

On a side note: IM LOVING WRITING DOHYUN THIS IS A PROBLEM I NEED HELP??? 😭 I'm also having lots of fun with writing Hyuna, I've never had this much amusement writing ocs in a story before 😭 (not that I wrote a lot at all but you know XD)

Either way I hope you liked (? XD) this chapter and Dohyun's proper introduction, you're more than free to yell at me for the additional cliffhanger 🫶 🤍Comments are always very very appreciated and loved so don't hesitate to leave some and let me hear your thoughts hehe, thank you for reading if you have 🤍

❧ Twitter

— Characters' visuals —

Dohyun
Hyuna

Chapter 14: Memories From The Past

Chapter Summary

Ink and a piece of paper unearth forgotten memories.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is quite heavy, so please make sure to check out the list of trigger warnings!!

Cw:

1) Kidnapping
2) Torture (nothing overly graphic but still be mindful of the general warning of 'Graphic depiction of violence')
3) Emotional manipulation
4) Blood, violence
5) Human trafficking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Apologies for the mess. I didn’t think he would receive any guests today, and he hasn’t showered yet.”

Jungkook startles when Dohyun’s shoes click across the floor. Seungwon is silent next to Jungkook, and when he glances at him, Seungwon looks wary, seemingly as uncomfortable as Jungkook feels in Dohyun’s presence.

Perhaps Jungkook could use Seungwon's unease to his advantage, somehow? But how? Jungkook doesn’t even know if—

“I’m starving,” Seungwon announces.

Dohyun turns away from where he had been rummaging through a table tucked against a wall. Jungkook jerks backward when the man moves closer to unlock his handcuffs. “Yumi and I were about to have lunch," Dohyun says. "You will find some food upstairs if you wish. Jungkook and I will join you in a few.”

Jungkook has never seen Seungwon afraid, yet the dragonborn does not protest at Dohyun’s underlying order, instead nodding and marching out of the cell.

The door closes, leaving Jungkook alone with Taehyung and Dohyun. Revna whines in Jungkook’s mind, most likely curled into a ball in her ruby, away from the ghastly sight.

Jungkook has to get out of here.

Today. Tomorrow.

Now.

Doesn't matter when but he has to take Taehyung with him, however how can he—

"What is your mind brewing about, hm? God… You interest me more and more." Dohyun leans closer to Jungkook, a smile dancing on his lips. "Are you wondering what I will do to him?"

Jungkook does not answer, the words stuck in his throat. His limbs are stiff, and he does not think he could move if asked to.

"Why won't you answer me?"

There's an imperative in the question.

Jungkook nods.

Taehyung hasn't woken up. Jungkook hopes Taehyung does not yet. At least he's peaceful in his sleep, hopefully away from Dohyun and the pain.

"He hasn't told you how I take care of him?"

Jungkook shakes his head. Dohyun's chuckle resounds in the stillness as he walks toward Taehyung. Jungkook tries to take a step back but he pauses at the glance Dohyun sends his way. The warning is evident in the gaze, and so Jungkook listens.

Dohyun halts by Taehyung's side. He cards a hand through Taehyung's strands, the gesture eerily gentle. "My dove is a tad disheveled, isn't he? There's a bottle of water," he adds with a motion behind him.

Jungkook only notices then the 'instruments' neatly aligned on the table, devoid of any blood: pliers, surgical knives, scalpels and a hammer. There's even a wooden tray with vials and other jars on it along with a cooler on the ground. He tries not to think about which were used on Taehyung.

"I'm sure you've been missing him," Dohyun resumes, "so why don't you clean him up? At least his face. We can't have this ruffled sight be the last one you have of your husband, don't you think?"

Jungkook isn't deaf to the command.

His steps are mechanical. He tumbles along his way to the table but catches himself in time. His hands struggle to grab the water bottle and gauze pad, the grasp of his fingers too feeble.

"You won't be able to clean him from so far away," Dohyun notes, breaking Jungkook from his stupor.

Jungkook blinks away the drop of sweat trickling down his forehead. Before he realizes it, he's standing still in front of Taehyung. He doesn't remember walking back.

With a hand on Taehyung’s scalp, another under the chin, Dohyun tilts Taehyung’s head back. He pushes the wet bang away from Taehyung’s forehead.

The rupture within Jungkook deepens.

Tears well in his eyes that dart over Taehyung's face. There’s blood everywhere: on the cheeks and jaw, on the nose and eyelids, and akin to the rest of his body, there are purple bruises marking the skin, some darker than the others.

“Clean him up.”

Something drifts down Jungkook's cheeks when he peers at Dohyun.

Dohyun is smiling again, oozing of vile happiness betrayed by the way his teeth show between his lips.

Jungkook doesn’t want to die. He doesn’t want Taehyung to die or be hurt either, but he doesn’t know what to do.

“No?”

Jungkook shakes his head, his hands clenched around the bottle and gauze pads.

“Ah... Is it because there isn’t enough to clean?”

Jungkook’s eyes widen.

“I get it. I feel the same way sometimes. I like cleaning my dove’s wounds, it is one of my most treasured ways to bond with him,” Dohyun continues, stroking Taehyung’s hair. “The more there is to clean, the longer I am allowed to tend to him, talk to him, learn more about him, while he does about me.” Taehyung’s head lolls forward when Dohyun relents his hold. He produces a scalpel from one of his pockets. “People are most honest when vulnerable. Truer to who they really are." He angles Taehyung’s head backward. The scalpel lifts, pressed on the lower lid.

“No,” Jungkook blurts out. “No, please don’t— Please.”

“Has my dove told you about the different breaths he has?”

“No,” Jungkook whispers, both an answer and a plea.

A glint of contentment ignites in Dohyun’s eyes. “He has yet to trust you, I see. I could show you.”

“S”fine.” Jungkook wants to say more but his mouth clamps shut when Dohyun lightly pushes him away from Taehyung.

Dohyun grabs two of the chairs stacked in a corner of the room. One is placed in front of Taehyung, the other next to him. “Have a seat."

It’s only when Dohyun himself settles Jungkook on the chair facing Taehyung that Jungkook’s legs unlock and bend at the knees, unable to carry his weight any longer.

“Now… My dove is a very, *very* special one. The most precious bird I’ve ever had.”

Panting elevates in the room. Jungkook belatedly understands they're his own.

In a flurry of cloudy motions, Dohyun withdraws his arms and plunges the scalpel. Not in Taehyung's eye, but instead through the back of Taehyung's left hand.

"Stop! Stop, please, please stop… *Stop.* " Jungkook's shoulders shake with the cries that rattle his body, his heart erratically beating in his chest. "Don't hurt him, please. Please, I'll—" An aborted sob dies in his throat. "I'll clean him. Gonna clean him." He makes a move to stand but Dohyun stops him.

"No. Stay seated. You'll see how captivating it is. Arcanes like this one exist, but never to the capacity my dove's does," Dohyun excitedly raves. "It's better with more important wounds. This one won't do."

When Dohyun removes the knife from Taehyung's hand, a trail of blood splatters across Jungkook's face. "No, please. 'don't want to see."

"I offered you to clean him up, and you refused."

"I will now, I will, I— Just let me clean him, I promise I will."

"Clean him up, if so."

Taehyung's face is a blur of carmine that changes to the one of Dohyun's face when a hand grabs Jungkook's chin to turn his head.

Dohyun's levity is gone when he speaks, his timber promising a thousand and one misery. "Clean. Him. Up. *Now.* "

Jungkook scrambles with the bottle. Revna's whines amplify.

The cap is stuck.

The bottle cap is stuck, Jungkook can't open it. His fingers refuse to cooperate and Taehyung's hurt but *he can't open the bottle —*

Dohyun tuts. He takes the bottle from Jungkook. "It's alright, I'll open it for you." There's a speck of Taehyung's blood at the corner of Dohyun's mouth. "Here."

Jungkook grips onto the bottle. The cold water spills over his knees and the floor when he tilts it to douse the gauze pads. Dohyun settles on the chair next to them, facing the two of them.

"Oh. Lovely necklace."

Jungkook thinks he's gonna get sick, bile rising at the back of his throat. Revna hisses and rapidly clicks her tongue in the ruby, not audible for anyone other than Jungkook. She's ready to lunge at Dohyun even if it wouldn't help with anything.

If Jungkook loses Revna—

"I see you're wearing one of his scales as well." Dohyun's hand plucks a golden chain from underneath his dress shirt to lay it over his chest. It's a pendant where a small, white wing made of scales dangles at the end of it. "He's marvelous, isn't he? His dragon form is a beauty that attracts

all eyes. It certainly had caught mine back then," he grins. "You can get to work. I want to make sure you know how to properly clean him before I leave to eat lunch."

Jungkook peels one of the gauze pads. Jungkook can nearly feel an echo of Taehyung's own pain in his left hand as he passes the gauze over the cut. Blood spills from the stab wound. It doesn't take long before Jungkook has to swap for another gauze that he uses to fruitlessly clean the limp fingers.

Jungkook does his best to remain quiet. He doesn't want to upset Dohyun into hurting Taehyung again..

"Forget this one. It'll stop bleeding very soon." Dohyun seizes the water bottle. Jungkook does not resist when the man spills its content over Jungkook's hands, rinsing the blood from them. "Silly prince. You're supposed to clean him, not dirty him."

Jungkook nods, because this is all he can do.

"You can take care of his face instead."

Jungkook obeys.

He slowly cups Taehyung's cheeks, lifting his head. The bruises and injuries seem worse like this, while a few inches away from Taehyung's face. He's gentle when he brushes the gauze over the laceration on Taehyung's temple, ever so careful in spite of his constant tremors. "God…" Jungkook rasps through a sob trapped in his throat as he dabs the bleeding on one of Taehyung's lips. ""M'sorry."

"What for?"

Jungkook's gaze darts on Dohyun. He shakes his head.

Dohyun's mouth opens, however he's interrupted by a guard entering the cell.

"Hey, boss," someone says and enters the cell. "Lunch's ready."

"Thank God." Dohyun sighs and rises to his feet, leaving the bottle where he had once been sitting. "You've evidently been trying to find a way out," he says and props an arm on Taehyung's to lean to the side and meet Jungkook's gaze. "There isn't any." The blade of the scalpel drags along Taehyung's wrist without cutting. "The only escape you will ever find are those I will grant you. Do you understand, Prince?"

Jungkook nods, humiliation searing through his veins when Dohyun responds with a humorous sound. He doesn't recoil when Dohyun holds onto his face.

"True," Dohyun says, his thumb faintly pressing at the corner of Jungkook's eye. "True," he continues and dries a tear. "True as well, surprisingly," Dohyun smiles when he touches Jungkook's mouth. "It turns out you *can* honestly beg. How charming... Seungwon wants you, but I might keep you to myself," he muses. "I want to peel away all the layers you've shown, those Seungwon's foolish mind is blind to. I could help you create better ones, like I have with Taehyung. My precious dove and prince. Does it not sound like a wonderful tale waiting to be told?"

"Sure thing, boss," the guard laughs.

“Look at him.” Dohyun hums through a chuckle. “He was terrified of me. He still is. And yet…” He quietly surveys Jungkook for a moment. “Yet, I must have said something that has displeased you: you're meeting my eyes again, your hands aren’t shaking anymore… What has ignited the embers?”

Jungkook manages to stand, somehow, the strength in his legs fed by those bloodthirsty, wrathful demons. They writhe between his ribs, claw through his throat, crave to gorge onto blood and violence and death, *begging* to be freed.

And so Jungkook allows them to speak, words wrenched from his mouth.

"If there is a God you bear any faith for, pray to them, Dohyun. Pray that I never find an escape. Pray that I never find you again, that I *die* before you do. Plead for your God to accept your meager tribute, because the *second* you make one. Single. Mistake…” Jungkook leans closer to Dohyun, his eyes born onto him. "I’ll tear you apart worse than what you’ve done to Taehyung, and I’ll have you beg for mercy I’ll laugh at.”

Dohyun’s expression smooths to a calm indifference.

Jungkook worries that his defiance may be received with a punishment for himself. For Taehyung.

However Dohyun peers at his guard and says “Do you understand, now?”

“Crystal clear, but Seungwon won’t like you keeping Jungkook."

“Seungwon isn’t a problem.” Dohyun turns away. Jungkook breathes a little easier at the distance. “Worst case scenario: he becomes a new bird. Best case scenario: we find him a new doll. This man is easy to please. Jungkook,” Dohyun starts as he makes his way toward the exit. “Continue to clean him until I’m back, and take your time. I will finish the work myself nonetheless.”

Dohyun and the guard disappear behind the cell’s door that closes with a click.

Jungkook crumbles on himself once alone.

He slides on his hands and knees, the gauze pads scattering across the floor as they fall from his grasp. Quiet whimpers escape his mouth and he rests his head against Taehyung’s knee, trying to muffle his sounds in the crook of his elbow.

He doesn’t know for how long he sits there, cold and unable to stop his tears, however a cough snatches his attention. His head darts up.

“Taehyung?” Jungkook rises on his knees to cradle Taehyung’s face.

Taehyung coughs a second time. His lids flutter open. His eyes are bloodshot, the left one blemished with a black eye.

“Taehyung…”

Taehyung startles and jerks away from Jungkook. His gaze snaps in every direction before settling on Jungkook. His lips press into a thin line, then his nose curls around a glower that is dampened by the way he shakes. “Fuck off.”

“Wh—”

“You drank that potion. I’m not falling for it again.” Taehyung's voice wavers on the last word.

“It’s me."

Taehyung shakes his head, and new tears collect in Jungkook's eyes.

“I promise it’s me. Nixes. Nixes, okay? Nixes, Taehyung.”

“The code’s fucking pointless when everyone knows it. Just— Just stop, pl—”

“You created a storm for me to calm me down after I heard the dragon roar. I once added salt to your coffee because you were being a prick but after you dug a hole in the fox’s eye because of me. It’s me.” Jungkook kneels closer between Taehyung’s legs, his hands tentatively hovering in front of him. “It’s me, Jungkook, and the Prince, and the Viper, and—”

“You need to get out of here."

“I can’t.”

“You have to.”

“Taehyung, I can’t. I’m—" Jungkook rests his palms on Taehyung’s cuffed wrists. "I don’t know how to. Seungwon’s here.”

Taehyung’s parted mouth clicks shut. “Fuck.” His head drops forward. “ *Fuck.* ” The tremors running through him worsen. “What did Seungwon say?”

“I'll leave with him in a few days.”

Taehyung deeply inhales and exhales as he nods. His shoulders sag, distant gaze aimed low. “Lovely?”

“She’s here.”

“You said she has a corrosive gaze.”

The guilt churns in Jungkook’s chest. “I lied… I said that so you’d be wary of her and me because I wasn’t fully trusting you at the time.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“S’fine."

“I should’ve listened,” Jungkook cries and raises his balled up fists to cover his face with them. “We should’ve gone with the others. I–I'm really sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter anymore. Wasn’t your fault.” The chains rattle when Taehyung makes a move to lift an arm. “What about her bite?”

“That was the truth.” Jungkook's fingers find their way back on Taehyung’s forearms where his thumbs gently graze. “It can be more or less deadly.”

“So her bite could kill a human?”

“Yes, but I can’t have her bite Dohyun or Seungwon, it wouldn’t help—”

“Let her bite me.”

Jungkook stops breathing for a moment.

“What?”

“I’m not— He hasn’t started yet," Taehyung rasps, so low and chewed, “but he will soon, and I won’t— I’m not going through that again. I’m not. And we can’t escape. *I* can’t.”

“I’ll find something. I have six days. *We* have six days. I’m not giving up yet.”

Taehyung smiles, something exhausted. Defeated. “There’s no way out. Not with him.”

“You escaped him once.”

“After over *six months*.” The blood on Taehyung's face is washed away by the tears he can't stop. “Six. Months. Of—” A virulent shiver wracks through his body. “I can’t handle the same thing again. Let her bite me, please. I can’t even help you get out. I can’t use my arcane aside from one. I can’t turn to dragon either because of the runes. I can’t do anything.”

“Taehyung, I won’t—”

“You can. You have to.”

“We can’t give up yet.”

Taehyung laughs through a cry and the sound turns into a keen as he heaves, his breathing irregular and intersected by sobs. Jungkook swallows down his own noises to softly cup Taehyung’s cheeks, wiping the tears with his thumbs.

“I’ll find a way out,” Jungkook promises but Taehyung denies it with a shake of his head. “We won't kill you.”

“You… You don’t understand. No one understands, m’tired."

“Then help me understand."

“How…”

“You can show me.”

Jungkook lets go of him. He beckons Revna who immediately slithers out of the necklace to inch near Taehyung. Jungkook grabs the dagger, ring and papers in her mouth.

Revna's head raises toward Taehyung’s. She bumps her snout against his forehead, emitting a sound between a hiss and a whine. Taehyung says nothing when she curls around his arm and neck, mindful of the injuries that she carefully avoids. She tucks her head in the dip between her body and Taehyung’s neck, remaining there.

There isn’t much that Jungkook can do at the present moment, aside from clinging onto this fleeting instance of comfort he finds in Taehyung while hopefully providing the same.

“Lovely, she— I’ll explain more to you when we’ll leave,” Jungkook backtracks. “I can store memories in the arcanic book I have, whether my own or others’. So you can show me, if you want. If you write with Lovely’s ink one or several words related to the memory you want to store, then the memory will be in the book.”

“It’ll leave my mind?” Taehyung wonders, hopeful.

“No, but sometimes it helps in making the memory feel lighter. Plus it's quite a taxing process, so you'll be sleepy, and you can sleep afterwards. Peacefully.”

Fleetingly.

“I don’t remember everything. Just some bits, s’blurry.”

“That’s fine, it’s okay.” Jungkook pushes Taehyung’s hair from his forehead to properly meet his eyes. “More memories than you remember could be stored in the paper, and it can help."

Surrender might be why Taehyung bobs his head in agreement.

Jungkook unfolds the piece of paper. Revna makes her way down Taehyung’s right arm, her head atop the hand. She keeps rubbing her snout against Taehyung’s wrist, pausing here and there to bump a knuckle in a kiss.

Revna’s mouth opens at Jungkook’s request. Ink slides down her fangs, replacing the venom. It falls on Taehyung’s knuckle then trickles down to the fingertip.

The pulp of Taehyung’s index slowly drags across the paper Jungkook lifts for him. The letters are wobbly but still readable.

‘Betrayed wings.’

The ink swirls, transporting Jungkook into the memories.

◯◯...SIX YEARS AGO... ◯◯

Taehyung walks through the streets of Vane's market, needing to buy some groceries. He greets the people he passes by, stopping at some shop to converse with the owners.

His trip ends at a newly formed stand where rows of spices are neatly arranged on the counter. The seller is human, he realizes. Taehyung doesn't mind humans much. He's not particularly fond of them after everything they have done to dragonborns, but it *is* in the past.

"Hey."

"Hi!" The man answers. He's young, probably 20 years old like Taehyung. "How can I help you?"

"I need this list of spices." Taehyung hands the man a piece of paper.

"Of course, lemme grab it all," the guy says and does so.

"You're new around here?"

"Yeah." The guy draws a small, awkward smile as he scratches at the back of his head. "It's a bit difficult to adapt to this new life, but it's much needed."

"You've never been in a dragonborn city?"

"Oh no, I have! My family imports spices everywhere, and they sent me here because I've been a bit rambunctious. But I've never gone to a dragonborn city as big as Vanae is. It's a bit intimidating."

"Vanae's people are good." Taehyung doesn't mean to sound so defensive but he can't help it.

"They are. They've welcomed me really well and helped me set up my shop. Here." He hands Taehyung a larger paper bag where the spices' smaller ones are tucked into. "That'll be 20 coins."

Taehyung rummages through his pouch and hands the 20 coins with an additional 10.

"Oh." The guy pauses then takes the lot with a smile. "Thank you."

"Good luck with the shop."

"Thank you for your patronage!"

The bonfire is highly appreciated in the middle of winter.

Taehyung is at the Seven Isles with his hunting squadron to sell the fruits of their last hunts. His team isn't a large one at the moment, of fourteen men and women, but it's a start.

Taehyung has always nurtured a leadership in him since he's been a kid, whether for school projects, at home with chores or during flying lessons where he'd help some of his classmates. So leading a hunting squadron isn't so different, but it is a lot more stressful when they're chasing after a flock of griffins.

It has been an endeavor as nerve wrecking as it is fucking exciting.

“You’re the spice guy!”

Laughter erupts around Taehyung. When his head darts toward the source of the exclamation, he sees the guy from the shop he had visited some time ago. “Hey.”

“Hey, what a coincidence, huh?” The guy grins and plops down next to Taehyung.

Taehyung shrugs. “I suppose.”

“I’m Jongsuk by the way, nice to meet you,” Jongsuk introduces himself, him and Taehyung shaking hands.

“Taehyung.”

“Yeah I’ve heard about you. You’re quite famous around here.”

“I’m their future leader, and the head of this hunting squadron."

“That’s right! Best leader!”

“We love you, future leader!”

“Hey, future leader! Come massage my shoulders! They hurt!”

Taehyung flushes under his teammates' relentless teasing. “Shut up!” He throws his cup at one of them.

“How did the hunting go?” Jongsuk wonders through a laugh.

Taehyung continues to talk to Jongsuk for the rest of the night. The guy is strangely nice even if a tad too loud and enthusiastic on some occasions. However the human is kind, eons away from the tales Taehyung has heard from his grandfather.

Taehyung’s relationship with Jongsuk has grown from client and shop owner to something akin to friendship over the past months.

Jongsuk is pretty nice to be around. Even Jimin likes him.

Minsoo, on the other hand, has vociferated his affront about Taehyung befriending a human.

The two of them have been fighting a lot lately. Taehyung is unable to fully relate to his grandfather’s hatred for humans, especially now that he has made a new friend with Jongsuk. Minsoo won’t stop growling about how Taehyung should never trust a human, but Minsoo has always been terribly prejudiced and wary of them. Irrationally so.

So Taehyung has been ignoring his grandfather. He prefers to meet up with Jongsuk and teach the human about dragonborns' traditions and more.

Today, Taehyung has invited Jongsuk to his home.

Dahee and Junhyun have immediately welcomed Jongsuk, Jimin as well who had been at home already.

Taehyung is happy to have made a new friend. He isn't the most adept when it comes to this, and he's grateful that Jongsuk doesn't seem to mind.

The last thing Taehyung expects when he flies Jongsuk to his house is for the latter to kiss him.

Taehyung jerks away and shoves Jongsuk. "What the fuck?"

"Oh I— I'm sorry. I thought—"

"You thought *what?* You can't kiss me like that out of fucking nowhere. What the fuck is wrong with you."

"I'm so sorry." Jongsuk rubs his hands over his face. "I thought you were gay and—"

"I am but that doesn't mean I'm interested in you like that." Taehyung wipes his mouth with his sleeve.

He hates this.

The simple idea of being so intimate with someone has his skin crawling.

"I've never given you any signal that I might want to— To date you or whatever."

"No, no, it's okay. It's my fault. I misread everything and got ahead of myself." Jongsuk looks contrite, his mouth twisted around a frown. "I didn't really mean anything by it. I just thought we could have some fun."

"I'm not interested in that."

"You've never had anyone?" Jongsuk relaxes, his hands in his pants' pockets. Taehyung shakes his head. "That's cool, to each their own. I've been depressingly single for a looong time. I just need some action."

"You should see Jimin for that."

Jongsuk brightens. "Really?"

Taehyung nods.

"I will then. He *is* my style."

“Good, I guess.”

“I’m sorry again,” Jongsuk quietly says and rests a hand on Taehyung’s shoulder. “I hope it doesn’t change anything between us. I value our friendship a lot.”

“It’s fine. Just don’t do it again.”

Jongsuk grins and hugs Taehyung, patting his back. “I won’t, don’t worry."

After this incident, his and Jongsuk relationship doesn’t take the hit Taehyung expects it to. It doesn’t change for the worse, and no awkwardness lingers between them. Jimin refuses to fool around with Jongsuk, talking about some sort of unknown ‘dragon code’ that Taehyung shrugs off.

Jongsuk has found someone else anyway, the poor guy a blushing mess under Jongsuk's flirtatious jests.

Taehyung shakes his head and laughs, smiling when Jongsuk sends a wink his way.

“Jongsuk invited me to the festival in Runalis,” Taehyung announces months later.

“Ehh, you two are getting closer and closer, huh?” Jimin teases.

“You know it’s nothing like that,” Taehyung snaps. “I don’t like him like this. I’m not interested in any of that. You know it.”

“Sorry, I was just teasing you,” Jimin says from where he’s resting his head on Taehyung’s belly. “You see him more as a brother then?”

“Meh? Brother is pushing it a lot. I see *you* as my brother. Jongsuk is just a friend. A close one.”

Jimin's head twists to glare at Taehyung. “I sure hope I’m your only brother, asshole.”

Taehyung asks Jimin if he wants to join him at the festival, but Jimin says that he can’t, too busy with the onslaught of commission he has received.

So Taehyung will go there — mostly — alone, even if his organs are close to spilling out of his ass with the idea of being so far away from home in human territory. Taehyung has never gone to any human festival, but at least Jongsuk will be there with him.

Taehyung flies the two of them to Runalis while taking some breaks here and there.

He and Jongsuk finish the rest of the trip in a carriage when they stumble on a group of humans and dragonborns driving to Runalis as well.

The festival in itself is wonderful.

Taehyung is having a *blast.*

He’s a bit awkward at first, shuffling on his feet in a secluded spot. He doesn't excel much in social situations — even less with strangers — but he tries his best, and most importantly, Jongsuk involves Taehyung well in the festivities.

Jongsuk has a group of friends there that he presents Taehyung to.

The group has heard about Taehyung, it seems, because they immediately break into grins and happy greetings.

Everyone in Jongsuk’s group of friends is impossibly kind and welcoming, and when Taehyung comes back home two weeks later, it’s with a large smile on his face and a plethora of new acquaintances.

Taehyung has been invited to more and more bonfires and festivals with Jongsuk’s friends who have slowly but surely become Taehyung’s friends too.

Taehyung doesn’t remember a time where he has felt this welcomed and appreciated by people. The humans are incredibly friendly, curious even. They ask about dragonborns’ traditions and Taehyung’s arcane, eons away from the wariness and scorn Taehyung expects.

They're even more accepting of his draconic heritage than dragonborns themselves.

He also happily shifts into his dragon form to fly up high while some of his new friends sit on the back of his neck.

Taehyung hasn’t told them about all the breaths he has, especially not the one he has inherited from his grandfather on his mother’s side, nor the one that he has promised his mother to never use. No one really knows them aside from his family, but he has shown a couple aspects of his arcane to the rest of the group.

Tonight, Taehyung is having a bonfire with Jongsuk’s group of friends — and now his own too. There’s a new face today, a warlock.

Jongsuk introduces Taehyung to a certain Yumi.

Taehyung eats, laughs and enjoys his outing with the group.

He grows more and more tired as the night elapses, his words slurring together from fatigue. He’s so tired that he feels a little drunk even if he never really drinks alcohol.

He’s really, *really* sleepy.

So much so that he leans against the trunk of a fallen tree while a soothing song is being played, his eyes shutting as he falls asleep.

Voices erupt.

Dozens — *hundreds?* — of them, resounding in a constant cacophony.

Taehyung is sitting on a chair. He doesn't remember falling asleep on one.

The last memory in his mind is his group of friends and the bonfire.

Everything grows louder, piercing through the migraine that ruptures his mind. Vociferous yells and excited whistles flare from everywhere. Sounds of footsteps, rattling wood and knocked metal punctuate the ambient discord.

Taehyung's vision adjusts to the obscurity.

Thick, black curtains surround him, like some sort of room with walls of fabric.

He frowns. His confusion grows. He tries to shift to his dragon counterpart, however he can't.

Taehyung can't turn.

He doesn't really understand why, his thoughts muddled. Maybe his sleep has been too deep, and so instead he focuses on the imaginary roulette of his arcanes that he visualizes in his head. The intangible arrow slots on the fire aspect.

Nothing happens.

Now that Taehyung properly begins to awaken, he notices that he can't feel *any* arcane in his breath pouch, saved for one. They're simply...

Gone.

Taehyung springs up.

He attempts to, at least. But he can't budge an inch. He glances down and feels more than he sees the heavy, metal cuffs surrounding his wrists and ankles, strapping him to the chair's arms.

Anger immediately simmers within him.

He fights against his bindings and musters all of his strength to break free, however it's fruitless no matter how hard he yanks, pulls and wrestles.

He's about to yell a spiel of obscenity when a loud voice startles him.

"Everyone, rejoice! And gather around for our last, most precious prize of the night, and perhaps even of our lives!"

The voice is familiar. It's trailed by a flurry of gasps.

The curtains drop in rustles.

Taehyung is blinded by the abundant sources of light burning his eyes. He blinks to chase away the blurriness, and then gets his first proper look.

He’s settled in some sort of high platform with a wooden podium on it. It looks like a pit of some kind, the ceiling stretching high above him. The walls of the room are balconies more than anything else, spreading up to a dozen floors if not more.

People are installed there in raised sittings, all overlooking the platform Taehyung is on.

All watching him.

They all appear to be humans at first glance. He can't discern any scent some dragonborns carry with them.

Taehyung's dry throat clicks when he swallows, in sync with his speeding heart. He peers ahead of him.

There are chairs lined up in front of the platform.

He recognizes some of the faces amidst the hundreds of gazes born onto him, all belonging to Jongsuk's group of friends: he remembers the man that had shared the death of his wife with Taehyung, or another that had taught Taehyung a new recipe, and the few others he had taken to fly with him.

They’re all holding paddles with numbers on them.

Taehyung peers at the man who had spoken earlier.

“Jongsuk?”

Jongsuk walks toward Taehyung. Taehyung does not react when Jongsuk slams the cane he’s walking with on Taehyung’s shoulder.

Oh.

Taehyung is half naked too. He's not wearing any shirt.

“Fear not,” Jongsuk says when a worried hush carries through the room. “His arcane is sealed, courtesy of our dear Yumi here.” He motions to his left.

Taehyung remembers Yumi. The warlock. But her face is different for some reasons.

“He cannot retaliate no matter what is being done to him."

Bursts of *‘Thank God!’* run through the room.

“Now that everyone has settled down… We shall begin!”

Claps reverberate through the ground and walls, rumbling through the floor Taehyung's bare feet are rooted on.

Taehyung pulls on his handcuffs again. He doesn’t care if he may break a bone in the same process. He tries to turn again but it still doesn’t work and—

A shriek blares through the area.

It’s high-pitched, a shrill that seems to quiver through every single cell in Taehyung’s body as he writhes. He folds in half as pain implodes in his limbs, in his chest and brain. *Everywhere.* The agonizing throe is what he would imagine the pain to be if he were to be burned alive and torn apart layer by layer of skin at once.

His mouth opens around a silent scream, his vocal chords tightened shut. There’s some aching in his shoulder blades too, as though something has been wrung and forced out of his back.

The shriek stops.

Taehyung’s body relaxes as he falls limp on his chair, gasping for air. It takes him a while to be more conscious of his limbs. Or of the weight on his shoulder blades.

He hasn’t summoned them, yet when Taehyung peers behind him, his white wings are out.

People gasp around him. Some of the people in the seats in front of him raise their paddle. They shout numbers.

Taehyung’s heart hammers in his chest, every pulsation a heavy thud.

“First and foremost, allow me to introduce you to our prize,” Jongsuk says. “The bidding will begin afterward.”

It’s an auction, he realizes with a hastening breath.

Taehyung is at an auction.

Taehyung is the lot being sold.

“This dragonborn is quite special,” Jongsuk resumes, his voice carrying across the room. “Not only are his dragon form, scales and wings of an extraordinary, rare beauty,” he says as he circles Taehyung, sliding a hand along the span of Taehyung’s right wing, “his breaths are also what makes him so valuable. *Exceptional.* He has several breaths, however only one of them is the reason why we will start the bidding at one million coins.”

“One million?!”

“This is madness!”

“What breath?!”

“Show us the breath!"

“Is it dangerous?! Will detaining him put my family at risk?!”

“Would you like to know his peculiar breath?” Jongsuk asks.

“Yes!”

“Tell us!”

“Stop dragging this on and tell us!”

Litany of *'Yes'* and *'Show us'* are yelled across the room and balconies.

" *Healing.* "

Jongsuk must sense the perplexity that befalls upon the buyers because he carries on.

"However, not a simple, meager one… This price has regenerative healing. I have seen it with my own eyes. It allows him to heal cuts, broken bones, burns. *Anything*. And most importantly…" Jongsuk stands next to Taehyung. He's smiling, his gaze full of a cruel merriness. "He can regrow limbs."

Taehyung can settle at the end of two extremes in the spectrum of his fear: composure or violent instability.

Right now, Taehyung stands on the latter.

His muscles tighten as he strains against his bindings. He yanks on his arms and blood begins to seep from where the metal of the handcuffs break his skin. The shriek happens again. Louder. More painful. Taehyung's body grows rigid, his vision hazy, and when he thinks that he might pass out from the pain, it stops. Perspiration blooms on his skin, the droplets splashing on the ground.

A sound catches in Taehyung's throat when more pain ignites in his wings.

Hooks are pierced through the flesh, underneath the main bone. Chains are looped through them and fastened on the rafter above Taehyung. Some people tug and as they do, it pulls on the hooks in Taehyung's wings, hauling and spreading them higher and higher.

"Let him turn!"

"Yeah! It'll bring more scales and skin!"

"But it'll also allow him to stomp and kill us, you fool!"

"What did you just call me?!"

"Make him turn!"

More yells fly around.

Taehyung is trying to breathe but he can't. No air can be sent into his lungs.

"Everyone! Please!" Jongsuk hammers his gavel on the podium, placating the clamor. "We are more civilized than this. As for the prize, his ability to enter his dragon self has been momentarily put to sleep. Dragonborns' arcane are more powerful in their dragon forms, rendering it impossible for Yumi to seal the prize's breaths. However, Yumi is capable of sealing *all* of the prize's breaths while excluding the healing one if he is in his human form."

More people argue, some yelling to speed things up and properly start the auction.

"Donghee?" Jongsuk's head turns around.

Taehyung looks in the same direction.

A burly man walks up the stairs leading to the platform.

He has a sword with him. An executioner one.

Any thoughts Taehyung's mind may conjure are annihilated by the vision. When the shriek rips through him anew, he ignores it to keep trying to extricate himself from the shackles but the pain is too much. Taehyung can't leave. He can't leave. He's gonna die here. *He doesn't want to die.* He thinks of his parents and Jimin, of how heartbroken they will be. He doesn't want them to suffer like that because he has been stupid. *Naïve.*

The man with the sword halts on Taehyung's left.

He lifts the weapon.

It's not aimed at Taehyung's neck, strangely, and Taehyung peers at it in confusion, the shapes blurred. The executioner sword hovers behind him.

It swings down in a clean swipe.

Taehyung yells as agony shatters through his back and down his spine and it is so ghastly that he wonders if he might die from it. His voice falls mute. The shrill too. Tears stream down his face and spasms won't stop coursing through his form, relentless. The adrenaline helps with the pain, running hot and cold in his veins.

He doesn't get to catch his breath or process what is happening before the same laceration occurs a second time on his right shoulder blade. His consciousness recedes more and more as his vision darkens.

People clap around Taehyung.

Chains rattle.

Then silence.

Taehyung doesn't want to look back. He knows he shouldn't, but he does anyway.

He sees them then.

His wings.

Ruptured from his body, hung up above him, the white scales catching the candles' light.

Paddles are raised.

Numbers are shouted one after another.

One million.

One and half million.

Then dozens of thousands are added again and again.

A warm liquid flows down Taehyung's back from his wounds, but also dripping from his wings.

A hunger wades in the buyers' eyes. They don't see Taehyung as a living being. He's nothing but a prize. A new object to add to their collection.

"Twenty million coins," a man says.

Silence floats in the room, all eyes diverted on the one who has spoken.

"Twenty million for the wings?" Jongsuk wonders.

The man chuckles. "No. For the bird. I want him."

Footsteps echo as Jongsuk disappears. Hushed whispers trail behind that Taehyung can't make out.

Taehyung wants to move and attempt to break free again, but he can't, paralyzed on his chair.

Jongsuk reappears in front of Taehyung. He walks to the podium, a wooden hammer in his hands. "Anyone willing to bid higher than twenty million for the dragonborn?"

No one speaks a word.

Jongsuk slams the gavel on the podium.

"The dragonborn has been sold to number 219 for 20 million coins!"

Protests erupt but Taehyung can't hear them. His gaze drifts on the man.

On number 219.

The man's face is hidden by a mask.

Something is locked around Taehyung's neck, and he passes out.

"Good morning, dove."

The confusion fogging Taehyung's mind is ripped away by a fear he hasn't known very often.

He's tied up with shackles and chains like he had been at the auction. The location is different, however. He's inside a dark and humid room.

Taehyung wonders if this is all a vivid nightmare conjured by his brain in a sickening twist of his imagination. But the lingering ache in his shoulder and body answers that question for him. His wings that have grown back do so as well.

Taehyung has never lost any limbs.

The only reason why he knows his regenerative healing breath allows him to regrow any body part is due to a visit to the Elders when he had been a child and unable to control his breaths. The worst he had gone through had been the tip of his finger being cut off then regrowing in the matter of a

couple hours. So Taehyung wonders how much time has passed for him to have fully regenerated his wings again that are limply draped over his back, their skin cold.

A foul scent of coal suffuses his nose when someone moves in front of him, followed by a hint of rotten mint.

“We have to properly figure out how quickly you can regrow your wings. It is quite spectacular.”

It’s the man from the auction. The mask is still present, only the eyes showing. The corners of his eyes crinkles as he crosses the distance between himself and Taehyung.

Taehyung evades the hand the man brings forward, however not for long because the collar around his neck impedes his movements.

“Shh… I will take care of you, hm? You’re my dove now."

People enter the room, bustling around and dropping some objects on a table.

“My name is Dohyun, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Dohyun says and caresses Taehyung’s cheek. “Ah... You might become my favorite one. My previous birds never survived my admiration for them, but I believe you could. You will, won't you?”

Taehyung can’t repress his uncontrollable tremors or the whimper that climbs up his throat when he sees the executioner sword a man hands to Dohyun.

Dohyun shuffles next to Taehyung. "I will be the one taking care of you from now on. First, we have to find out the most effective way to detach them."

“Don’t. Please don’t.”

“And you plead beautifully as well. Aren’t you perfect?”

The laceration of Taehyung’s left wing is unexpected, wrenching a cry out of him.

“Quiet, dove. We are barely starting.”

Taehyung is panting, the quivers here anew.

He watches how his wings are being wrapped in protective leather bags.

The warlock enters the room.

Dohyun is sitting on a chair behind Taehyung, brushing a cloth on Taehyung’s back. He's slathering an antiseptic and numbing pomade on the wounds where what’s left of the wings’ bones are protruding. “What is it, Yumi?”

“We can’t speed up the healing process. His arcane is too intricate and potent for me and the other warlock I know. If we want to enhance the healing speed, I’d have to lessen the potency of the

runes' seal, meaning that he'd be able to use two or three more of his breaths, and none of us would want that."

"I see. Well, it's fine. I don't mind. I can be patient, and he will need the rest in-between two collections either way."

"I'm supposed to have six pairs of wings as payment. They sell for much at the black market, right?"

The tears silently escape Taehyung's eyes.

He hadn't thought of that up till now.

People will buy his wings.

They'll wear them. They'll make leather of the skin, jewelry of the scales, furniture of the bones. They'll find joy out of Taehyung's agony.

"The last pair sold for 700 000 coins, but I suspect they will sell higher as time goes on, and as the words spread."

Yumi gasps. "Really?"

"You'll have your payment in due time, and your monthly allowance as well. The first pairs are mine," Dohyun says. Taehyung whines when the cloth is swiped over the opened wound. "The next six will be yours."

'The next six.'

They'll keep cutting Taehyung's wings off. Every time Taehyung will wake up, it'll be to his wings being ripped from him.

Taehyung doesn't give up yet. He refuses to even if the terror threatens to devour his sanity.

His parents, Jimin and Vanae's people are looking for him. They'll find him. He just needs—

He needs to handle the pain and the fear and the repulsion and *everything*.

He has to.

Days have passed. Perhaps a week.

Taehyung has changed location. The place he's in now is cleaner and more of a bedroom. This one has a mattress and a proper toilet in a smaller room. He has blankets too, given to him by the guards at Dohyun's demand after the latter had realized that the shaking in Taehyung's limbs had not solely been due to the pain.

Taehyung has tried to escape three times already.

The first when he had been brought upstairs to shower. The second when he had been taken outside by Dohyun to ‘take a breath of fresh air.’ The third had been pointless: a headbutt and knee in the stomach on one of the guards, and Taehyung had been reprimanded for it after.

Dohyun’s punishments are as painful as his ‘admiration.’

Hits. Cuts. Breakage. More cuts. And after them, when Taehyung is crying, promising to behave, pleading for respite, it finally stops. Then Dohyun carefully tends to Taehyung’s wounds, with a gentleness that involuntarily alleviates some of the tenseness in Taehyung's muscles.

Taehyung has stopped trying to escape for now. Instead, he thinks about his options.

He keeps an eye out for a proper, tangible occasion of running away rather than going through worthless attempts that will only lead to more pain. It’s better to watch and listen. Wait and endure. His family will find him. He’s certain of it. It’s only a matter of time, because he doubts he will ever be able to escape on his own unless Dohyun makes a convenient mistake.

But waiting for a mistake is like waiting for the pain to stop.

It never happens.

Taehyung had assumed he'd eventually be numbed by the collects, but he is not. It becomes worse instead. It’s as though the pain of his wings is piling up. He wonders if this is where the limit of his regenerative healing breath lies: regrowth, but the pain of the lost limb never fades away, never fully. Or perhaps it’s due to the amount of time he has had to regrow his wings. He’s not certain.

Taehyung is exhausted as well, which does not help. His sporadic sleeps aren’t really peaceful, let alone revitalizing. He dreams of his home and his family, where he’s safe and happy. However he jerks awake moments later, back in the room where everything crashes onto him, more heart wrenching than before.

So Taehyung hates sleeping, but it’s not like he can avoid it.

He has learned a couple more things though.

First is that the shackles and chains are riddles with runes, the reason why he can’t use most of his arcane or shift to his dragon counterpart. The room is also full of runes; the house and the land surrounding it as well. The runes outside — remnants of the Great War — apparently prevent dragonborns from shifting into their dragon self while greatly reducing the power of their arcanes.

Dohyun had told this to Taehyung, and Taehyung believes that Dohyun has no reason to lie.

After all, it only aggravates Taehyung’s sense of hopelessness. Even if his family finds him, they wouldn’t be able to win against Dohyun, the guards, Yumi, and the other warlocks Dohyun commands to his whims.

Taehyung has been here for a month now.

He knows because his wings take 24 hours to regrow, and they have been severed from his body 32 times.

“They are looking for you."

Dohyun and Taehyung are sitting outside in the garden, the former sipping on a cup of minty tea.

Taehyung is settled next to Dohyun on the bench, eyes glazing over as he peers at the grass.

Dohyun allows Taehyung to come outside every afternoon. Every day, Taehyung is given a taste of freedom that seems to grow farther and farther away from him.

“It’s quite entertaining to see them scramble around without ever finding anything,” Dohyun chuckles. His mask is still on and hasn’t left his face once. “It’ll be funnier once they find your location and realize that, even with this acquired knowledge, they won’t be able to take you away from me. They’ll certainly die trying to. Your friend will. What’s his name already? Jimin? *Park* Jimin now, is that correct?”

The fury blazes within Taehyung. He hasn’t felt a sliver of it lately, only in passing and promptly swallowed by the fatigue and pain.

Dohyun hums. His index finger rests under Taehyung’s chin to lift his head and have their eyes meet. “Mentioning your friend brings out interesting emotions in you. Perhaps I should have him here as well.”

Taehyung’s eyes widen. “No, no, no. No. Please. I’ll— Please don’t.”

“Why not?”

“You have me.”

“I have you?” Dohyun echoes and Taehyung nods. Dohyun chuckles, the kind that is happy and often occurs after he has taken Taehyung’s wings. “Good. You have me too.”

The hope begins to wane.

Taehyung tries to not let it happen, but he’s tired. And scared. So, *so* afraid all the time. He just wants everything to stop.

The sole partly positive matters are the daily outings, the showers, the meals, and his upgraded bedroom. He’s fed three times a day — although he sometimes can't keep his food down, to Dohyun's chagrin.

His injuries are also always cleaned and soothed by Dohyun who never allows anyone else to do it.

Dohyun talks during those times.

Taehyung knows Dohyun a lot more than when he had first been bought, which makes sense, but it's still odd: to have grown so deeply acquainted with his persecutor.

In retrospect, aside from the ripping of wings and sporadic punishment when Taehyung crosses the line in some ways, Dohyun isn't really mean. He doesn't mock Taehyung, unlike some of the guards do. He doesn't send snide looks or remarks at Taehyung. He doesn't insult or belittle him. Instead, Dohyun provides Taehyung with entertainment like books. He keeps Taehyung fed, cleaned, warm, and always makes sure that the damages he has inflicted on Taehyung aren't and won't be infected. Tenderness always follows the pain. Dohyun always makes sure of it.

It's confusing.

Taehyung abhors Dohyun like he has never hated any other being. If he were to be freed, Taehyung would lunge at Dohyun to kill him.

He thinks. He's not certain.

Maybe he'd be too scared to do anything. Dohyun terrifies Taehyung more than Taehyung loathes him. The smile Taehyung can hear in Dohyun's voice scares him. Dohyun's gentle touches do too, preceding or following brutal ones.

At least, thanks to Dohyun and the guards, Taehyung is gathering a better understanding of humans, especially male humans. How insidious they are. How vile, greedy and manipulative humans can be in their cruelty. The more Taehyung's wings are removed from him, the more he sees the guards parade around with the scales they have turned into the jewelry and clothes, the more Taehyung comprehends that his grandfather had been right all along.

If Taehyung hadn't trusted humans, if he hadn't trusted Jongsuk, this wouldn't have happened. Taehyung wouldn't have been reduced to a beast bled for money and vanity.

Taehyung hasn't seen Jongsuk since the auction.

Jongsuk had asked, apparently, but Dohyun had refused.

Taehyung thinks that Dohyun has killed Jongsuk.

Taehyung has noticed Dohyun's sense of ownership. The extent the guards have been allowed to touch Taehyung is away from Dohyun's knowledge, when they lash out on Taehyung. But they never leave any traces behind, instead they hurt what has already been hurt.

It lasts for a while, but one day Taehyung tells Dohyun.

He tells him of what the guards do to him.

Dohyun appears shocked by the news, his eyes set on Taehyung. Then he smiles and nods, and he cuts Taehyung's wings before tending to them.

The very next day, new guards enter the room, and Taehyung never sees the previous ones again.

46 times.

However, the rhythm changes today.

Dohyun doesn't appear satisfied with how long it takes for Taehyung's wings to heal and regrow. So he has come up with another idea he wants to try.

"You have the pliers?" Dohyun asks one of the ten men in the room.

A chorus of *'Yes'* elevates in the cell.

They're surrounding Taehyung's back. His wings have regrown, however unlike the past times, they're spread wide with ropes.

Something new is about to happen, and Taehyung is so madly terrified.

"Remove his scales one by one. I want to see how many hours it takes for them to grow back on his wings. You each have a bucket of water with you. Make sure to break as little of them as possible. A single scale is worth more than your life. If he asks for a break, you give it to him without question."

"Understood, boss."

"He's shaking a lot though, boss."

Taehyung is but even if Dohyun were to punish him for it, he wouldn't be able to stop the quivering.

Dohyun's gaze looks saddened when he cups Taehyung's cheek. "My dove... It'll take some adjustments, but we have to see if it works out for you and me. You'll be fine. You can handle this, and you know I will make you whole again"

Taehyung hasn't had any tears left to shed for days, *weeks*, but he cries again today.

Dohyun cards a hand through Taehyung's hair. "You can start."

Taehyung has had the nails of his index fingers and thumb completely ripped off one time during a hunting accident. The pain had been bad, but it's nothing compared to the one that begins now. This isn't like the scales he sheds here and there in his dragon form or that naturally fall off him. Here, most of the scales are ingrained in the skin and flesh of his wings.

Pain blooms all over his wings, running down his spine and soon in every limb of his. It's worse than having his wings entirely cut off because there, it's continuous. It's incessant and spreading everywhere.

Taehyung wants to stop sobbing but he can't.

Dohyun takes one of Taehyung's hands between his own, holding it and appeasing Taehyung's cries.

Taehyung hates how much he clutches onto these moments of forged comfort. He hates how the man hurting him is also the one consoling him. But Taehyung still clings onto them because it's the

only support he has keeping him above water. Because Taehyung has no one else's hand to hold. Because aside from Dohyun, no one is helping him.

His family isn't. His people aren't. Dragonborns aren't. They must have given up or forgotten about him by now, and Taehyung can't blame them for it.

Taehyung only has himself in this room.

Himself and Dohyun.

Hours later, his scales that were of an iridescent white are now coated in blood in the buckets they're piled in.

"They're done for today," Dohyun reassures and wipes Taehyung's tears. "I'll clean your wings now."

Taehyung should shrug off the touch, but instead he nods and squeezes Dohyun's hand back.

Taehyung thinks two months and a half have passed since he has been taken in by Dohyun.

Taehyung can regrow all of his scales in five hours, seven if he's tired. So now Taehyung uses this as a new way to keep track of time but it's becoming more and more difficult, and he cares less and less.

It doesn't matter anymore for how long he's been here. Plus sometimes they change and switch the cadence by cutting Taehyung's wings before reverting to plucking the scales one by one.

Taehyung is so exhausted.

He doesn't even want to leave anymore. He just needs the pain to stop. It's only when he sleeps that it does, however never for long, his dreams still plagued by the memories of his home.

Taehyung has completely lost track of time.

Maybe he's been here for years or months. He doesn't know.

He doesn't scream anymore, half because he can't, his voice gone, and half because it's pointless. He does cry sometimes though, but he's getting used to the pace, although not the pain.

It's a routine. A tiring, horrifying one.

Wake up. Eat. Have his wings or scales ripped away. Dohyun tending to Taehyung's wounds. Eat. Have a shower. Eat. Use the restroom in-between. Fall asleep. Wake up.

Again and again.

He’s currently on his way for his shower. Sometimes he cleans himself on his own, other times Dohyun helps when Taehyung’s limbs can’t move, whether from the pain or fear. Or apathy. It’s hard to feel anything other than agony or nothing. He doesn’t crave to escape anymore. He doesn’t want anything aside from the impossible.

Taehyung is dragged away from his thoughts by the sunlight that bathes his skin as he steps into the living room.

“A visitor,” Dohyun says.

“You stole merchandise from me.”

Taehyung’s head darts up at the familiar voice.

The guards are filling the room. Yumi is present as well.

“Elder Miseon,” Dohyun smiles. “Which merchandise do you speak of? I sell many goods.”

Elder Miseon’s gaze fixes Taehyung. “The one you’re holding.”

Taehyung?

He’s the merchandise? Is she talking about his wings?

“My dove?”

“One of my boys had made a brash decision without consulting me beforehand and has sold Taehyung to you. Taehyung was supposed to be mine to keep and sell the wings of. Not yours,” Elder Miseon says, her tone glacial. “Finding your location has been a struggle and has taken me *months*. I expect an appropriate compensation in return.”

“I’m a private man.”

Taehyung is lost.

Is she here to help him? Where’s his family? Are they still looking for him? He peers at Dohyun then, searching for support and understanding in the man. He immediately notices Dohyun's distrust for the Elder.

“I cannot give you my dove, I’m afraid,” Dohyun says, his hand between Taehyung’s shoulders.

“Which is why I would like to buy pairs of his wings with a satisfactory discount."

“Aren’t Elders supposed to, ah, help and guide dragonborns?”

Elder Miseon scoffs. “Rotten apples fall from every tree.”

Taehyung wonders if this is really all that he is: merchandise to be sold.

Maybe this is where his worth comes to a halt. That would explain why he’s still here, because even the Elders, his people or family aren’t looking for him anymore.

“How about a chat?” Dohyun tugs Taehyung to one of the couches.

The two of them sit down. Elder Miseon follows suit and settles on the sofa facing theirs.

“I’m curious to see what led one of the most loved Elders to be here, supposedly wanting to buy pairs of my dove’s wings. You’ve made yourself quite vulnerable. You must be aware of the runes littering this place.”

“Does the name Jongsuk ring a bell?”

“Of course.”

“He is the boy I mentioned. Or rather ‘was.’”

Dohyun seems taken aback, mirroring Taehyung’s own surprise.

“He was tasked to bring me Taehyung after selling the first pair of wings.” Elder Miseon slides some jewelry across the table, some that Jongsuk used to wear every day. “A proof, if you need one. Your warlock had clearly… ‘Charmed’ him with the task of walking home and dying there from self-inflicted wounds, which he has. Thank you for taking care of him,” she smiles and peers at Yumi. “I had the chance to bury him along with my other boys.”

“Every bird should go back to their nest."

“I agree.” Elder Miseon's gaze settles on Taehyung.

A shiver creeps up Taehyung’s back, his hands gripping on his pants.

“Except this one,” Dohyun steps in, timber clipped.

Elder Miseon chuckles. “Being granted pairs of his wings will suffice. I need them for research and expenses.”

“You will be able to have the first one in 17 hours, the time left for them to regrow.”

Then, Dohyun and Elder Miseon discuss.

They talk and talk and talk and this sense — *conviction* — of betrayal flares in Taehyung.

Again.

Elder Miseon inquires about Taehyung’s arcane at some point, and Dohyun answers her with barely contained excitement as the two of them exchange knowledge about the Arcane. Dohyun is still evidently wary of the Elder’s unexpected appearance, but he seems to push it aside for now. Elder Miseon also mentions how she is the one who used to give a hand in dragonborn trafficking back in the days, and that she can provide proof of those and a list of contacts that Dohyun can go through to verify her words.

They speak about matters Taehyung stops listening to.

The flicker of hope that had rekindled within him is gone.

Dohyun cups Taehyung’s head and props it on his shoulder.

Taehyung leans against him.

“You may reside here for the next 11 days, if you wish,” Dohyun proposes.

“It would be lovely,” Elder Miseon smiles.

Taehyung is being led to his other room. He enters it and sits on the chair, his movements mechanical.

“The cuffs, dove.”

Oh.

Right.

Taehyung had not noticed, but the shackles had not been around his wrists, only fastened around his neck. So he places his hands on the chair’s arms as Dohyun ties him there. Taehyung had not *realized* that he could have felt a sliver of his other breaths swirl in his breath pouch. It’s gone now anyway aside from his healing breath, so it does not matter anymore.

Dohyun and Elder Miseon have negotiated the prices and fallen into an agreement. Dohyun still doesn’t trust the Elder, which is most likely why he says “Usually, only I cut his wings, however I will make an exception.”

This is obviously a test, one that Elder Miseon takes with a stride as she chuckles and pushes herself from the wall she is reclining against to cross the distance. “Which instruments do you use?”

Dohyun launches himself into a detailed explanation about the process of the wings’ dissection and how meticulous she will have to be. Elder Miseon listens, nodding her head and asking a few questions as she picks up a surgical hammer, then scalpels.

She and Dohyun are still exchanging when she stands behind Taehyung.

They still are when she breaks the humerus of the right wing. Elder Miseon sounds happy, and Dohyun appears pleased by the display of their shared proclivities.

Dohyun’s voice loses its defensive edge the more Elder Miseon severs Taehyung’s wings from his back.

The anger that his own kind is against him doesn’t last for very long. Taehyung is too fatigued to muster that kind of sentiment, let alone allow it to turn into an emotion that could fuel his will to escape.

Elder Miseon has ripped Taehyung's wings 11 times.

Dohyun and Elder Miseon get along well. They share the same joy and love for barbarism. Taehyung doesn't know if he's imagining it, but Dohyun looks fond and impossibly taken by Elder Miseon, however not the same way he is taken by Taehyung.

"You are special. Our bond is," Dohyun had said when Taehyung had asked. *"You have nothing to fear, my dove. Only you can break and mend my heart."*

Dohyun appreciates Elder Miseon's presence enough to invite her to accompany him for the biannual auction that occurs at Eden.

Taehyung has been cleaned by Dohyun and given some time off. Dohyun had said that Taehyung has been doing well for the past five months and a half, and that Taehyung has earned his well deserved holiday.

Taehyung's wings haven't grown back yet, but the blood has stopped oozing from the wounds, only a couple drops still trickling down that Dohyun wipes off. The runed cuffs are fastened around Taehyung, linked by a long chain. The metal collar and shackles on his ankles aren't there. Dohyun had judged them unnecessary.

Taehyung is escorted outside, Dohyun's hand on his back. He, Dohyun and Elder Miseon enter the carriage that will transport them to the Seven Isles. There are more carriages at the front, half of them filled with Taehyung's wings.

They begin to drive away from the house, soon entering a road carving through a field of grass.

"I will miss this," Elder Miseon sighs after two hours, sitting in front of Taehyung and Dohyun.

"Hm?"

"I haven't had such entertainment since the old days. Breaking, cutting…" Elder Miseon trails off. "I forgot how amusing it is."

"Well." Dohyun's smile is audible in his voice. "The trip to Eden will take us a few days. You can play with my dove one last time today, if you wish. He will have a proper rest afterwards."

"We will have to meet again," Elders Miseon says with a pleased curve of her lips. "I have never encountered anyone who shares the same *passion* as I."

Dohyun chuckles. "It would be my pleasure."

Elder Miseon leans forward. Taehyung recognizes the smile on her face. It's the same one she has adorned when Dohyun would allow her to hurt Taehyung in other ways than through his wings. She has a particular fondness for the thumbs, Taehyung has noted, and it is proven once more when she grabs a hold of Taehyung's thumbs.

"It is quite convenient that his bones are the first part to heal. It grants more time to tend to his wounds and clean him."

"I agree. It's wonderful," Elder Miseon says.

The two of them fall quiet. Dohyun has a book on his lap, his head lowered as he reads it.

Elder Miseon peers outside the window, her gaze settling on the sky. She observes Taehyung again. Taehyung barely winces when she effortlessly breaks both of his thumbs, the joints moving. Something in her eyes catches Taehyung's attention. The levity and cruelty is gone from them.

Then, everything happens fast.

Taehyung hears a roar in the sky.

A dragon's roar.

Dohyun's head darts to open the window, his eyes away from Taehyung and Elder Miseon.

Elder Miseon's gaze is fixated on Taehyung's.

She yanks the handcuffs from Taehyung's wrists. They easily slide off due to the broken thumbs that don't block off the shackles.

Taehyung can feel his arcane flicker to life in his breath pouch. His dragon counterpart awakens from its deep slumber. Growling.

Ravenous.

Elder Miseon's mouth parts around one word. "Turn."

"Dove, don't you d—"

It's an instinctual reaction when Taehyung pulls at this core inside of him and brings forth his dragon self.

The carriage explodes into splinters.

Elder Miseon shifts as well and vanishes from Taehyung's view in a blink of an eye. She reappears ahead of him, her talon breaking through one of the carriages at the front.

Taehyung falls onto the ground as pain bursts on his back where his wings should be. The transformation has reopened the lacerations on the skin of his shoulders. His limbs are weak, barely holding him up. He goes through the roulette of his breaths that he can finally feel again. He settles on the fire aspect and he tries to breathe out a cone but all he can do is cough, unable to collect his breath in his throat.

Taehyung watches the humans being torn apart by Elder Miseon. He watches Dohyun staring up at him without an ounce of fear.

Taehyung recalls this look.

He has seen it the third time he had tried to escape months ago.

Taehyung should attack, yet he's rooted in place.

This was a bad idea.

Taehyung won't be able to run away. He won't succeed. But he'll certainly suffer the consequences of trying.

“My dove,” Dohyun starts, and Taehyung lowers his head to the ground before Dohyun, his ears flattening on his head, “you do not want to—”

The roar tears through the area once more and this time, a gargantuan dragon grabs a carriage to squish the transportation and those inside.

Elder Miseon is holding someone.

Yumi.

The lizard on Yumi’s head opens its mouth. Taehyung flinches and writhes when the shrill sound happens. Thankfully, before he can fall unconscious from the pain, Elder Miseon withdraws her arm to throw the warlock through the field of grass.

Dohyun snarls. “Yumi!”

Yumi’s second familiar rapidly rolls toward Dohyun. It spits out a door that Dohyun swings open and walks through without looking back. The few dragonborns working for Dohyun are present, fighting with the gargantuan dragon.

Taehyung properly looks at the unknown dragon.

He falls on his front when he recognizes the person.

“Taehyung! Turn back to human!”

Taehyung watches his grandfather fight, incapable of helping or using any of his breaths even if the shackles are gone.

“Taehyung! *Turn!”* Elder Miseon’s voice booms through the area, and so Taehyung obeys.

He shifts back to his human self and he doesn’t get to do anything else before Elder Miseon transforms into her dragon self to grab Taehyung in her talon. She emits a growl at Minsoo who shifts to human and leaps on her palm.

The ground grows farther and farther as Elder Miseon flies away and higher up the sky. She cradles Taehyung and Minsoo against her chest, darkness soon enveloping them in her talon.

Taehyung doesn’t understand what is happening.

Maybe this is another trick of Dohyun, maybe Yumi or another warlock has found a way to create such vivid dreams.

A crack resounds through the air. There’s a swirl in Taehyung’s chest, as though he’s moving at a speed his body can’t handle. Then he remembers how Elder Minseon’s breath is a sonic boom, one that allows her to travel at the speed of sound.

Everything is obscure around Taehyung. He can’t see anything but he can feel his breathing pick up.

A hand clasps his own, the skin on the fingers and palm rough with calluses.

Minsoo’s hand.

“You’re safe, kid. We found you.”

Taehyung wakes up to yells. Screaming. Rattling. *Too loud*.

His lids fly open.

There are lights coming from everywhere.

People are bustling around him, rushing past where he is.

He doesn’t feel the weight of the cuffs on his neck or wrists, but he sees someone above him. It’s not Dohyun or any of the guards. He doesn’t know who it is, but his fist smashes across the person’s face. He springs up and a scream wrenches in his throat when pain shatters through every cell of his body, the worst it has ever been.

Hands grab his arms and legs and chest to pin him down on a surface.

“We need help here! He’s awake!”

“Minsoo! Elder Miseon!”

“Coming!”

Taehyung wrestles against those holding him because if Dohyun isn’t here maybe he has a chance. Maybe *this* is his last chance to ever be freed.

“Kid, Taehyung,” a man says — Minsoo —, his face hovering above Taehyung’s. “Kiddo, you’re with us. You’re at Vanae. We found you. You’re safe and sound now.”

Taehyung tries to listen to Minsoo but a yell intersects Minsoo’s words.

It's feminine and familiar.

It’s the voice of Taehyung's mother, crying out and ringing between his ears.

Taehyung can’t tell if this is real but he grabs onto the sleeve of his grandfather’s shirt, tears falling down his temple. “Don’t let them see me, please. Please, they can’t— Can’t see me, like this. Don’t tell them, please… P–please.”

“I won’t, kid. I won’t, don’t worry."

“Don’t tell them— Jimin’s— Where’s he—”

“He’s south of Vanae looking for you. We haven’t stopped looking for you, kid. Not for one second.”

Taehyung crumbles onto himself, sobs racking through him. Minsoo’s arms wrap around him as Taehyung’s hand grip onto the back of Minsoo’s shirt. “Thought you stopped."

“You’ve got one thing coming if you think that.” Minsoo's timber is gruff but it sounds wet too. Taehyung feels a drop falling on his neck. “Vanae and dragonborns from other lands have been upturning everything to find you.”

“My wings,” Taehyung hiccups and he can’t stop shaking, his voice strained and every word interrupted by a whine. “They kept— My wings, it hurts, make it stop. Hurts too much.”

Taehyung suddenly goes limp against his grandfather as a sudden exhaustion falls onto him. The pulsations of his heart that had sped up grow slower and slower. His vision darkens at the corner, soon entirely black.

“He lost too much blood!”

“Focus on … his arcane! It’s nearly depleted … and we have to—”

“But it isn’t possible … can’t empty their breath pouch…”

“Do as I fucking say before I … Hurry…”

NOW

Jungkook gasps when he’s hurled out of the memories.

His respiration is the only sound in the room when he peers up at Taehyung who’s looking back at him. Tears are swimming in Taehyung’s eyes, none of them falling unlike Jungkook’s.

“God... Taehyung—” Jungkook pauses to press the back of his hand against his mouth and quieten himself. “We’ll find a way. *I’ll* find a way. Dohyun—”

Taehyung's face pinches. “Who’s Dohyun?”

“Dohyun is—”

“Dohyun’s— He’s—” Jungkook doesn’t know if he should tell Taehyung or not, but when Taehyung’s confusion morphs into an upset he says “Dohyun is the name of the one doing this to you. He’s the one who— He’s the one who hurt you back then.”

“I don’t remember,” Taehyung mumbles, his lids slowly blinking.

“It’s okay. I’ll find an escape for us. I’ll—”

“There isn’t any, not now, not again, so when you’ll leave with Seungwon—”

“I won’t leave without y—”

“When you’ll leave,” Taehyung presses, "have her bite me. Or plunge a dagger in my throat, I don’t care, just don’t leave me with him. I won’t survive this a second time, and— And even if I can, I don’t want to,” he whispers with a shake of his head. “I don’t want to. It hurts too much. I can't— I’m tired.”

“Taehyung—”

“Please.”

“Listen—”

“*You* have to listen, I—”

“Taehyung.” Jungkook cradles Taehyung’s cheeks, their faces a few inches apart. “It doesn’t matter what I’ll have to do to get you out of here. I’ll find a way. I will. I’m not leaving without you, okay? I’m not.” Taehyung pulls himself out of Jungkook’s grasp but Jungkook scrambles to cup Taehyung’s face again, their gazes finding each other. “Don’t give up yet, please? Just— Give me a chance. Remember what I told you about how I always find a way out of trouble? I will again. I promise you. And if—” Jungkook shushes Taehyung’s sobs with a hand that he softly cards through Taehyung’s hair. “And if I can’t, then— Then I’ll do what you asked.”

“I’m tired,” Taehyung murmurs.

“I know. I know, Tae… It’ll be okay. I'll get us out of here.”

Taehyung stares at Jungkook for a moment. Revna has found her way back around his neck. She nuzzles Taehyung’s temple.

Then Taehyung nods, and Jungkook releases the breath he had been holding.

“Thank you,” Jungkook says through trembling lips. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Chapter End Notes

> When I tell you I was crying writing the end part of this chap… XDDDDDDD You now know most of what Taehyung has gone through with Dohyun and I wonder if some of you had an idea that this had happened to Taehyung?? I did scatter a couple hints but again they may have been too subtle to notice without knowing what you’re looking for you know? 🤔
>
> N O N E T H E L E S S This chapter is the “it gets worse” and next one will be the “before it gets better”, so hang in there y’all, I promise plenty of ✨healing✨, ✨fluff✨ and ✨rest✨ for the boys and most importantly: our poor taekook T____T 🤍
>
> As always thank you for reading if you have and feel free to comment hehe, I hope you realize how much they mean to me and how motivating they are T_____T 🤍 Kisses to your forehead and let’s have a group hug 😭🤍🤍🤍

(my authors notes are always so long sorry 💀)

❧ Twitter

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Taehyung from the memories he showed to Jungkook (cw // for slight blood!!) made by riveranil211920
❧ A moodboard I made by july_fairy02
❧ A moodboard II made by EviL_onion_ring
❧ A moodboard III made by inurlttr
❧ A photo sequence/story moodboard of this chapter and Dohyun made by 97II94

Chapter 15: A Viper's Vendetta

Chapter Summary

Jungkook and Taehyung formulate a plan to escape, although absurd and impossibly unstable. Will they succeed? Or will Dohyun prevail once more?

Chapter Notes

I don’t have much to say, enjoy 👀🤍

Somewhat song recs??

a) Song 1. I played this one while writing starting at "Seungwon pushes Jungkook forward, the two of them..."
b) Song 2. Then I swapped to this song starting at "“Watch,” Seungwon says and turns Jungkook..." until the end of the chapter!!
c) And for before that I swapped between three playlists: Playlist 1, Playlist 2, Playlist 3.

Cw:

1) blood, violence
2) fist fight
3) sword/dagger/knife fight
4) graphic depiction of violence (idk if it’s THAT graphic but tagging it as such just in case because I’m really bad at estimating how graphic something is since I’m very desensitized to violence in fiction 😭)
5) Seungwon refers to Jungkook as a whore in two instances

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay."

“Okay?”

Taehyung nods then heaves out a trembling sigh. “I need— I need to focus, ‘cause… ‘Cause if I don’t focus on something, my mind’s gonna— I won’t want to—”

Jungkook gently wipes the tears clinging onto Taehyung’s eyelashes with the sleeve of his shirt. “You could tell me what you know,” Jungkook proposes. “About this place, the runes or anything else that you believe could help us in finding a way out.”

“Yeah.” Taehyung nods. “I can.”

Jungkook lowers his hands on his lap. He stands to sit on the chair that he brings closer to Taehyung. Jungkook is mindful of his movements, making sure to not accidentally bump into one of Taehyung's wounds. Revna hasn't moved from where she's nuzzling the dip of Taehyung's neck, keeping the dragonborn warm when Taehyung would usually be the one doing so.

Once his breathing is a little more even, Taehyung says "This isn't the same manor or land I was in when he had— When he had bought me. My old room back then had runes everywhere sealing my arcane, and look around this cell." Taehyung and Jungkook both survey their surroundings. "The walls are blank."

"There are runes on each door cell though, including yours."

"What do they look like?"

Jungkook describes the signs he has seen. Taehyung listens and as he does, his eyes widen while his mouth parts open.

Jungkook sees it then in Taehyung's gaze: the flame of hope and fight; small, almost entirely extinguished, yet flickering to life.

"They aren't runes that seal a dragonborn's arcane or refrain them from turning," Taehyung breathes out.

"They aren't?" Jungkook shuffles closer to Taehyung as he leans forward.

"Fuck. This is… This is good. The runes you're describing are those used to hide locations, meaning that if anyone is to search through a location spell, this basement wouldn't appear. It wouldn't exist for them. But *only* the basement, not the entirety of this place."

"That'd make sense. This manor seems to be utilized as some sort of headquarters," Jungkook muses and he observes the way some of Taehyung's worst wounds stop bleeding, the benign ones becoming fainter by the minute.

"The previous manor and land were completely hidden. It's why it had taken so long for everyone to find me."

"You still have the shackles."

"But that's it. That's all." Taehyung's eyes dart between Jungkook's. "The only thing stopping me from using my breaths and turning are the shackles and the chains attached to them. If we find a way to— To remove them, even just one, I— Even *one* would be enough, because then the seal wouldn't be as strong anymore, and I'd get to use another one of my breaths. Maybe more."

Jungkook's heart pulses with newfound faith, in sync with Taehyung's. He glances around the room again. His gaze falls on the handcuffs around Taehyung's wrists.

"They're too tight to slide them off if you break some of my bones, and they're unbreakable, so that's not an option. Those on my ankles are usually always gone. I think he only fastened them earlier because you were coming in," Taehyung mulls over. "You could cut my hands off but that's an option I want to keep for last. Plus a dagger won't be enough to cut through the flesh and bone."

"The key."

“Uh?”

“If I steal the key then I can simply open the handcuffs.”

“I think it’d work? I think he does have a key for them, but I don’t remember. My memories are messy and— *Fuck.* We need to try but *how* would you steal it to begin with?”

Yeah, that’s another problem. Jungkook is barely allowed to leave his cell so stealing the key is, as of now, an impossible task.

“It’s too risky. He probably has it on him and there’s nothing I can do to help y—” Taehyung pauses. His head tilts to the side.

“What is it?” Jungkook wonders after a beat of silence. “Taehyung?”

“How many days has it been?”

“Since we got here?”

"Yeah."

“It’s been three or four days.”

“Has anyone taken you upstairs to shower?”

“Seungwon did today,” Jungkook says, confused at the out of the blue questions. “But he stayed with me and watched everything.”

Taehyung curses. “What about when you go to the restroom?”

“I usually use the one in my cell, but if I’m upstairs, I have to keep the door open.”

“You’re alone then?”

“No. Some guards are with me but they don’t pay much attention? They’re usually talking while I do my thing.”

Taehyung falls quiet. Something must catch his attention again because he peers over Jungkook’s shoulder before looking at him. “You can pick locks, right? I remember you saying that.”

“Yes, but I still don’t have anything with me to lockpick. I think the keys are our best option when —”

“Fuck the keys. Rats.”

Jungkook blinks, wondering if he has heard that wrong, and a morbid sense of hilarity swells in him that he can only convey with a few words. “Taehyung, I’m sorry but… *What?”*

“Listen.”

Jungkook does. He strains his ears to catch what may have been distracting Taehyuing for the past half minute. His torso twists around when he hears some squeaks chirp behind the cell’s door.

“There are rats here,” Taehyung continues. “Their bones are small. Very, *very* small.”

Jungkook properly examines the handcuffs then. The keyhole is fairly narrow, but still large enough for tiny bones to squeeze through.

“They can’t get inside the cells, there isn’t enough space under the door, but—”

“But when I’m upstairs, if there’s a rat, I can kill it and take the bones," Jungkook finishes.

“Yes.”

“Then I could lock pick the cell, then the shackles and then—”

The rest of Jungkook’s sentence stills as he and Taehyung’s gazes lock.

It’s odd and ridiculous the way something as mundane as a rat is giving them their first, tangible sliver of hope.

“This is the only thing I can think of. I can’t get out of this room, he’s being particularly careful with me. I haven’t been allowed to leave once and I probably won’t until you’re gone with Seungwon,” Taehyung explains. “And it’s not like you can kill them all to run away. You’re outnumbered, overpowered. We have no fucking clue of where we are nor how many guards and warlocks he has here.”

“Even Lovely being there wouldn’t help much.” The aforementioned basilisk turns her head to hiss at Jungkook. “I didn’t mean it like that, Lovely,”Jungkook smiles, small and tired. He notices the way Taehyung glances down at Revna. “Do you want me to take her away?” He asks, ignoring the petulant snuff Revna emits.

Taehyung shakes his head. “‘S fine. She’s warm.”

Taehyung is shirtless and Jungkook can only imagine how cold he must be without his fire breath. Jungkook has half a mind to cover Taehyung’s hands with his own, be a fleeting source of warmth, but he reneges the thought as quickly as it has arrived.

“So… So rats are the plan?”

“It’s fucking stupid but—” Taehyung never get to finish his words, the latter interrupted by some rattling outside the door.

The tentative peace that had settled between them shatters.

The two of them wait as they listen to the footsteps passing by the door. They don’t stop, instead growing quieter and quieter as the persons climb up the stairs.

Jungkook exhales a sigh of relief. He peers at Taehyung who’s relaxing in his chair. “It’s… peculiar, but it could work. I don’t know if some rats will be upstairs. I think I remember hearing some but I’m not sure, and if not, I can always— I’ll figure something out.” They have to handle this one matter at a time.

A silence floats in the room, only disturbed by their respiration or the click of chains when Taehyung moves.

Jungkook is fiddling with his fingers, picking at the nails to stop himself from reaching out.

There’s so much that Jungkook wants to say: reassuring words, promises that he’d vow to keep, or simple phrases to take Taehyung’s mind away from where they are. Yet nothing leaves Jungkook’s mouth. He’s not certain of how much time he has left with Taehyung, but he wants to gorge on every second of it, and give his husband as much comfort as he gives to Jungkook.

Jungkook glances up when he feels a gaze on him. Taehyung has a strange look in his eyes that Jungkook can’t really decipher, but it feels as though Taehyung is seeing him properly for the first time since they’ve been together in the cell.

“How are you feeling?”

“Uh?”

“How are you feeling?” Taehyung reiterates.

Jungkook doesn’t know why but the question prompts a prickling in his eyes. “I’m really scared,” he whispers. "Of what’s gonna happen to us. To you. I’m scared of Dohyun.”

“You’re being really brave.”

Jungkook had not realized that he needed to hear some kind of encouragement until they’re uttered by Taehyung. The weight in his chest alleviates a bit, enough for his breathing to be a little less strained. “You’re brave too.”

Taehyung opens his mouth to speak but closes it. Instead of the denial Jungkook assumes to be arriving, Taehyung says “Can you—” He attempts to move his right hand but his teeth grit when he can’t lift or turn his wrist. “Can you bring me your hand?” He asks, gaze evasive

Jungkook immediately complies. His left hand lifts toward Taehyung’s, and Taehyung’s fingers stretch to bump against Jungkook’s. Taehyung tugs them under his own, his digits tightening around Jungkook’s. Jungkook retracts his arm and before the upset that flashes on Taehyung’s face deepens, Jungkook properly intertwines their fingers together. Taehyung hooks his pinky over the wedding ring, the inside of the diamond swirling with the tempered storm.

“This is nice..."

“It is,” Taehyung lowly rasps.

“Don’t give up, please.”

Taehyung’s gaze flits on Jungkook before it falls down once more. “I’m really trying not to, m’sorry if I do, and for asking earlier for you to— I shouldn’t have said that. I just—”

“It’s okay, I understand.” Jungkook lowers to find Taehyung’s eyes. “I mean it. I understand. It’s— What you went through is—” He halts for a second, unsure on how to formulate his thoughts. “You’re really strong, Taehyung.”

Taehyung squeezes Jungkook's fingers. “So are you."

“It’s dumb to ask you but… How are you feeling?”

“I’m scared too, and tired, not just from the situation and being back with— With him."

Jungkook frowns, his thumb rubbing over Taehyung's who doesn't seem to mind. "What do you mean?"

"Some runes on the handcuffs and chains are different. They don't only seal my arcane and the breaths in my pouch. I don't know how to explain. It's like… Like the runes are sapping my arcane. I feel so depleted and parched. It's as though they're leaving me just enough arcane to use my healing breaths."

"They had years to perfect the runes, sealing spells and everything else. I've remembered them, so we can study them when we're back home."

"Do you—"

Voices and footsteps echo behind Jungkook, one of them belonging to Dohyun.

"Fuck." Taehyung's respiration picks up. He heaves a trembling breath and rapidly blinks as he stares at the door.

Revna reverts back inside the ruby at Jungkook's request.

Jungkook releases Taehyung's hand to cup his face, Taehyung peering back at him, his brows furrowed and gaze misty. Jungkook says nothing. Worthless words won't help. Instead he presses his forehead against Taehyung's, feeling the tremors that run through him.

Jungkook startles when the door unlocks and opens.

Dohyun is standing at the entrance, his smile ever present.

"Seungwon is asking for you. Something about keeping his doll fed," Dohyun announces and enters the room. He stops next to Taehyung. After a brief inspection, he says "You haven't cleaned my dove much, thank you. I'll get to spend more time tending to him."

A guard marches toward Jungkook and pulls him off the chair. The cuffs are back around Jungkook's wrists as he's led outside of Taehyung's cell.

He refuses to look back when Dohyun closes the door.

A calmness befalls upon Jungkook. It's unexpected, but he welcomes its presence.

They have a goal now.

A semblance of a plan, even if volatile and absurd.

Four days have passed.

Four days that have worsened Jungkook's sense of failure.

Jungkook hasn't left his cell once, and no rats have been found. None have conveniently entered his cell whenever the door would open to toss his meals on the ground, or when he'd been given a roll of toilet paper. Jungkook worries that Dohyun or someone else may have somehow eavesdropped on their conversation, but it doesn't matter anymore.

Jungkook has two days left to find a solution before he's obligated to leave with Seungwon.

Two days.

Two more days of hearing the strained groans and muffled whimper erupting from Taehyung's cells.

Jungkook doesn't know if Taehyung has gotten his wings cut off already, but the sounds keep him awake most nights until he passes out.

Thankfully, Dohyun hasn't visited Jungkook since he has forced him to 'clean' Taehyung. Only Seungwon has entered it to watch Jungkook eat from the ground. It doesn't change much from how Seungwon had treated Jungkook back when they had been promised, so Jungkook doesn't mind it much. He needs the food anyway to remain level-headed.

Nevertheless, Jungkook will depart in two days, and he has decided that if nothing occurs by tonight, he'll ask the guards if Dohyun can visit him.

Jungkook is not entirely certain on how the discussion will go, if he'll find a way to snatch the key, or if he'll manage to twist his words in ways that will convince Dohyun to agree on this or that. But Jungkook will try everything he can.

Jungkook still doesn't know if Dohyun will keep him and find a new 'doll' for Seungwon. This could be good news, but also a terrible one. Jungkook secretly hopes that, if he can't find a solution by the end of the week, Seungwon will take him away. The dragonborn is a lot easier to handle than Dohyun.

It would however mean leaving Taehyung with the man that has torn his wings dozens upon dozens of times and letting it happen once more.

Jungkook is curled up on his mattress when the door unlocks. Where he expects Seungwon to come in, instead it's the two guards that have been assigned to him since he has first been trapped here.

"Get up," one of them orders. "Seungwon wants you to shower."

"Why today?" Jungkook wonders. It differs from the routine.

"Because you're leaving in an hour."

Jungkook's breathing stops, or he thinks it does.

"What?"

"Just fucking get up." One of the guards yanks him up. He fastens the cuffs around Jungkook's wrists, tucking the key in his pocket and he pulls on the chain to prompt Jungkook to walk.

The pulsations of Jungkook's heart are surprisingly slow and steady. He anticipates them to speed up at the appalling news, but they don't.

Jungkook is being led through the long corridor, walking behind the two guards.

The stairs are a few yards away from him.

The second Jungkook gets on the staircase, everything will be over. When he leaves, he may not be able to find Taehyung anymore for God knows how long. It may take *months* again, perhaps even years, and it'd mean that during this time, Taehyung will—

Jungkook's ears converge toward a sound. He even holds his breath to properly hear and *listen.*

The squeak is trailed by chirps.

Jungkook's head turned to scrutinize the corridor behind him.

There's a stupid rat sniffing at a door, oblivious to Jungkook's train of thoughts.

The key to his and Taehyung's escape is *right there* but he can't simply grab the rat without raising all sorts of suspicion.

Jungkook looks ahead.

The guards are chatting together.

Jungkook stares at the back of their heads, the discussion not registering in his brain. He whispers Revna's name. It doesn't matter much if the guards hear it. They won't live to remember it. Revna's head peeks out of the ruby. Jungkook takes the dagger from her mouth. She disappears back into the gem as he tightens his grip around the handle.

Jungkook does not think twice.

The blade of the dagger plunges inside the throat of the guard on the left.

The guard coughs and makes a gurgling sound while he stumbles forward when Jungkook pushes him.

The second guard, much bulkier than the other, swivels around. Jungkook draws back his arms to stab the man, however the guards seizes the short chain of the handcuffs to slam Jungkook on the ground.

Air is punched out of Jungkook's lungs. White spots burst under his eyelids when his head hits the ground.

The guard straddles Jungkook and hisses "You'll fucking die, you fucking—"

Jungkook knees the guard in the crotch who loosens his hold enough for Jungkook to swing his dagger. The guard deftly avoids it, partially due to fast reflexes but also because of the cuffs limiting Jungkook's motions. The guard takes out a knife from his pocket that he drives deep into Jungkook's thigh.

Jungkook's teeth sink into his tongue to bite back a yell, blood suffusing his mouth. The guard removes the knife and Jungkook uses the momentum to push onto the man's chest and propel him away. The other guard is immobile on the ground, probably dead, and if not, about to die.

Jungkook scrambles on his knees but when he does, a fist smacks across his nose. His head jerks backward. He blindly swings the dagger in front of him. It must catch onto something because the guard curses and hurls Jungkook away from him.

Jungkook falls on his back again. He turns on his front to stand but fingers painfully snatches a handful of his hair to throw him on the floor. A shoe collides against his cheek and he doesn't get to try and straighten his hazy vision before another kick happens, this time on his hand and making him lose his grasp over the dagger.

Revna wants to come out but Jungkook can't risk her biting the guard. It'd leave traces and would bring forth questions about the venom's provenance in both Seungwon and Dohyun's mind that Jungkook would rather avoid.

"I don't even fucking care what your owner will say," the guard spits and delivers another kick on Jungkook's stomach. "I'll fucking kill your ass, you fucking bitch." He crouches to grab Jungkook's wrists, pinning them on Jungkook's chest.

Jungkook blinks to chase away the stars dotting his view. The guard lowers his face as he braces himself, aiming his knife above Jungkook's eye. Jungkook waits. When the guard begins to drive the knife down, Jungkook dodges to the side, the blade narrowly missing his eyes but nipping at the cheekbone. Jungkook cranes his neck up, his mouth parting open. His teeth bore into the guard's lip and cheek and Jungkook tears the flesh, spitting the remnants on the ground.

The guard groans in pain. He releases his clamp, his hands flying to his face. Jungkook shuffles on his belly to crawl toward his dagger that is just a few feet away and he's almost there, *just a little bit more and —*

The guard yanks Jungkook down and twists him on his front.

Jungkook slits the guard's throat, the sharp blade cutting through the skin.

Blood pours from the wound, drenching Jungkook's face and neck and he turns his head to the side while closing his eyes and mouth. When he opens them again seconds later, the guard is on his knees, raising a trembling hand to his throat as he drowns in his own blood.

The guard heavily slumps atop Jungkook.

Jungkook's shirt becomes damp with the blood oozing from the guard's wounds. He pushes the man off of him with a grunt. Jungkook spits some of his own blood and the guard's on the ground. He hoists himself up.

The other guard moves, somehow still alive.

Jungkook does not give him any chance to do anything. Instead he straddles the man and drives his dagger through the chest once, twice, again and again *and again*, and it shouldn't be as cathartic as it is, to kill someone. It shouldn't elicit a rush of adrenaline and unadulterated *euphoria* through Jungkook, yet every stab of his dagger through the pig's chest widens the curl to Jungkook's lips.

Jungkook eventually stops, breathless.

He rises to his feet. His head darts around until his ears finally catch the squeaks of the rat. He sighs in relief then staggers his way toward the first guard he has killed.

The *stupid rat* is munching on a piece of cracker that must have fallen from the guard's pocket.

Jungkook grabs the rat and unceremoniously snaps its neck in half, the faint crack and dying squeak resounding through the silence.

He skins the rodent. It only takes him a minute or so to end up with several tiny bones in his hand, yet this instance of lull feels like an eternity when every second counts.

"Revna," Jungkook begins after stealing the guard's key and unlocking his cuffs. She comes out of the ruby to grab the dagger. "Keep an eye out for me."

Jungkook runs toward Taehyung's cell and it's only then that his heart begins to hammer in his throat. He crouches in front of the handle, Revna's head on his shoulder. He's about to pick the lock when voices elevate not far from him.

They're coming closer, the footsteps pausing here and there.

"No. No, no, no. Fuck."

"Jungkook?"

Jungkook ignores Taehyung's call to shove the bones in his pants' pockets and run toward the two guards.

He surveys the scene.

It takes some maneuvering to lift and prop one of the guards on his shoulder, however Jungkook manages to carry the man. He races toward his cell to drop the body on his mattress, discarding the pain that blooms in every limb of his. Jungkook is brisk when he takes the dagger to slash at the guard once more, spreading the blood to cover the mattress with it and make it seem like the fight has started there and had then continued in the corridor. Once done, he turns the guard on the back, the body now laying half on the mattress and half on the floor, as though the man has been pushed aside.

After spilling some more blood from the second guard on the floor of his cell, Jungkook leaves the second body where it had been. He walks toward the opposite corner of the room. He sits there. He gives the dagger along with the bones to Revna who disappears inside the ruby. He draws his legs up to press his thighs against his chest and curl his arms around his knees.

Jungkook waits, not paying attention to his aching wounds.

The footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs.

The discussion stops.

Then the echo of shoes thudding on the floor becomes louder and louder until Dohyun, Seungwon and a guard enter the cell.

Dohyun examines his surroundings. He turns one of the dead guards on his front to scrutinize his face. He steps over the body and he hums as he makes a once over of the room, taking in the second guard on the mattress, the pool of blood drenching the fabric. His gaze lands on Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn't avert his eyes. He doesn't cry or fall into any of that useless babble with Dohyun. Seungwon looks both confused and concerned, and Jungkook revels in the sight.

"Now," Dohyun starts and walks toward Jungkook to stop a few feet away, "what has happened?"

Jungkook doesn't refrain an ounce of his scorn when he answers. "Your guards wanted to have their 'fun' with me before my departure."

Dohyun frowns, looking contrite. His stance loses its defensive edge. "My apologies. My workers know better than to ever abuse anyone in such vile manners."

Jungkook has to swallow down an incredulous laugh at how honest Dohyun sounds, the same man who has torn Taehyung's wings dozens of times.

"Are they dead?" Seungwon asks.

"What do you think?" Jungkook snaps. Tt earns him a glower from the dragonborn.

Idiot.

"Get them out and burn the bodies," Dohyun orders his guard. "They do not deserve to be buried."

Jungkook wonders if Dohyun truly believes the tale, but it doesn't matter as long as he remains alive and can enter Taehyung's cell before leaving.

"You're fucking dirty again," Seungwon spits as he surveys the state Jungkook is in.

"Wouldn't have happened if these men weren't born in a pigsty like you." Jungkook's retort brings out a laugh out of Dohyun.

"We're leaving," Seungwon says, resolute.

Dohyun glances at him. "So soon?"

Seungwon peers back, his nervousness evident when confronted with Dohyun's inquisitiveness. "Got some business to attend to."

"Ah, I see. I'd love to meet Jungkook again, if possible."

"Sure. But he's still my doll."

"Of course," Dohyun smiles. "I never steal from others."

Jungkook can't hold back his scoff. "And what do you call cutting off Taehyung's wings then?"

"Bonding," Dohyun answers without missing a beat. "How do you know about this? While reprimanding my dove, he told me you were never made aware of his and I relationship."

"You tortured him four days ago. I saw the scars on his shoulder blades one night," Jungkook lies. "I can add two plus two." *Unlike some*, he thinks to himself while watching Seungwon who approaches him.

Dohyun pensively hums. He stops the guard carrying one of the dead bodies. “Don’t burn them quite yet. I want to examine them. Ask Yumi to check if there’s any trace of arcane on or inside them.”

Jungkook has never been so thankful for his forthcoming. If Revna had bitten one of the guards—

“Get up.” Seungwon hauls Jungkook with a hand when the latter does not budge.

“Can I see Taehyung?”

Seungwon scoffs. “No.”

“Please. Seungwon, please.” Jungkook rushes past Seungwon to drop on his knees in front of him, wincing when it tugs at the stab in his thigh. He grips onto Seungwon’s pants and it’s easy to not pretend and not flare Dohyun’s distrust because Jungkook *is* desperate to see Taehyung, however not for the reasons they must assume. “Can I see him? I just want to see my husband one last time, and then I’ll do anything you want.”

Seungwon looks down at Jungkook, an arrogant smile coiling his mouth.

“You can— You can discipline me after, or ask anything of me, and I’ll do it. I’ll be good.” Jungkook sprawls his fingers on Seungwon's legs no matter how much he wants to sink his nails there. “I’ll be good to you. I promise. Please.”

“Look at you. On your knees and at my feet. Begging. This is where you belong. You get it now, Doll?”

“I do. I…. I promise I do. Can I see him? Please? Please, Seungwon.”

“I wouldn’t mind if Jungkook visits my dove once more,” Dohyun intervenes. “Being able to bid goodbye to his husband would give my dove some closure, so that he can relax now that he's back home. I would appreciate that a lot, if you would allow it. Plus there’s a matter I want to discuss with you briefly.”

Seungwon's eyes narrow. “‘bout what?”

“Your doll,” Dohyun replies and peers at Jungkook. “He interests me. A lot.”

Seungwon growls and for the first time, the anger seems to win over the dread. “He’s *my* fucking doll.”

“Of course, and I would never challenge that. However we could perhaps come to an agreement between the both of us. Some sort of joint custody. I wouldn’t dare deprive you of your doll very often, but I believe Jungkook would be a great asset for my dove. I would pay you in wings in return. We can arrange the exact amount together and sign an accord.”

Seungwon’s eyes lit up at the mention of wings. He watches Jungkook again. “You better be good to me, Doll.”

“I will, please. Can I?” Jungkook gets his response when Seungwon tugs him on his feet by the hair. “Thank you,” he says even if it burns his tongue as he does.

Seungwon pushes Jungkook forward, the two of them trailing after Dohyun who steps in the puddles of blood.

Dohyun leads them to Taehyung's cell where they stop. Dohyun retrieves his necklace with the key at the end of it and Jungkook thinks on how he could possibly steal it but discards the foolish idea.

Dohyun steps aside.

Seungwon thrusts Jungkook inside the cell.

"We will come back in a few minutes," Dohyun says and closes the door. He doesn't bother locking it this time, obviously aware that neither Jungkook or Taehyung will be able to run away unnoticed through the only staircase leading in and out of the basement.

Taehyung who looks worse for wear, bruised and bloodied, yet shock then concern knit his face as he studies Jungkook's appearance.

"Is that your blood?"

"For the most part, no." Jungkook rapidly limps in Taehyung's direction.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm trying not to freak out right now but I got some bruises, although a guard stabbed me in the thigh."

"A guard did wh—"

"I got the bones," Jungkook whispers. "I have the bones. I got them."

"Fucking— Get them out, get them out. Hurry."

Revna's head comes out of the ruby. She drops the rat's bones in Jungkook's palms.

"When are they coming back?"

"Don't know. Minutes."

Jungkook drops some of the bones between Taehyung's knees on the chair. He selects two that he believes will work best and he does not waste another second to begin to pick the keyhole of the right cuff.

His fingers are trembling. One of the bones breaks in between them. He curses and grabs another. It's covered in blood and it slips from his grasp to tumble on the ground.

"One thing at a time," Taehyung calmly says. "Clean the blood first."

Jungkook curtly nods. "Yeah." He wipes his fingers and the tiny bones on a dry spot of his pants then gets back to work.

"That's good. You've got a good grip on them?"

"I do."

Listening to Taehyung, focusing on his voice and breathing helps Jungkook maintain what sliver of composure he has left.

Jungkook inserts the bone that is the most flat inside the keyhole, and he uses the rounder one next, sliding it along the first. He closes his eyes. He feels the pins shift and push as he moves the pointy bones.

He has picked countless locks when he'd be thrown in a secluded room as punishment, or when he'd be forced to study and wouldn't want to. It's no new matter to him. So he listens to the clicks the inside of the cuff makes one after another.

Click. Click. Turn. Click. Press. Click.

Snap.

Jungkook has to be grateful for his quick reflexes when he catches the falling shackles right before it rattles across the floor's stones.

He stares at the handcuff in his hands. His gaze darts at Taehyung who's looking at him as though Jungkook is some kind of draconic deity, and if Jungkook hadn't been an inch away from descending into a fright attack at their dire situation, he'd blush under Taehyung's awe.

"You— You fucking genius."

"We're not out yet, I'm—" Jungkook blows out a puff of air and silently deposits the cuff on the ground before working on the second cuff.

"Breathe. You're fine. You've got this, alright? You removed one already and this is— This is the most we could have hoped for," Taehyung reassures and Jungkook exhales a trembling *'Okay'*. "I don't have any cuffs on my ankles, so you only have one left to remove, and if you don't, that's fine. We'll find something else. Our families will too."

Jungkook clings onto Taehyung's words as he tries to open the second cuff, however his fingers are shaking too much. The pins don't move how he wants them to. "But what if it doesn't work? Then —"

"Then we'll find another way. You'll be leaving with Seungwon, and it'll be easier to find an escape then. You also know about the purple door in the building fake Hoseok took us to. We'll figure out another escape route away from— From him. And on my side, I'll try to see if there's another solution. Alright?"

Jungkook nods.

The clicks happen again then a snap, but it's the one of a bone breaking again.

Frustration swells in Jungkook. His eyes prickles as he reaches for another bone that he has to wipe before using once more. "I won't stop shaking," he slurs through an aborted sob. "I'm sorry. I'm trying but I can't— I can't open it, it won't open, m'shaking too much." He feels a hand touch his cheek, then sliding down his chin to tilt his head up.

"You're fine. You're doing good, yeah? Don't pay attention to anything else other than the cuff. Breathe in for four and breathe out for four. Slow down while you're picking the lock. There's no

rush, hm?"

Jungkook does as Taehyung says. He directs his attention to the shackle.

One... Two… Three… Four.

He presses the flat bone down. The pointy one is next.

One... Two… Three. Four.

Taehyung's hand slides to cup Jungkook's nape. The touch is comforting, grounding, and so Jungkook concentrates on it.

One... Two. Three. Fo —

"Is that a dead rat?"

Jungkook freezes.

Taehyung does too.

"No, no, no. God." Jungkook continues his task but the shaking worsens the more he hears the conversation outside the door. "It's not opening."

"Where?" Dohyun asks.

"Boss."

"What is it?"

"There's a dead rat on the ground."

"A what?"

"A dead rat and not just dead. It's fucking skinned and doesn't have bones anymore?"

The voices come from above, distant and muffled.

"I can use another breath and buy us some time, but my arcane pool is low." Taehyung removes his hands from Jungkook's nape to shake it, clenching and unclenching his fingers regardless of the wounds in them.

The footsteps resound between Jungkook's eardrums, punctuated by the clicks of the pins.

A gust of air cold chills Jungkook's spine when the door swings open.

Taehyung must have chosen his force breath because he 'grabs' three of the guards that enter the room to break their neck against the wall.

Jungkook doesn't look behind. He trusts Taehyung.

However he allows Revna to leave the ruby to slither down his body and across the floor with which she blends in. One of the guards, unaware of the basilisk's presence, races inside the room. Revna lunges at his calf.

“Boss!”

Click.

“They’re trying to escape!”

“You fucking whore!”

Press.

Turn.

Taehyung is panting. Jungkook is too, half out of the trepidation that pulses within his veins, halt due to how he naturally syncs his breathing to Taehyung's.

Click. Turn. Click.

Fights break out around him.

Click.

Taehyung and Revna both hold back the flurry of guards entering the cell, the former by cracking skulls on the ground or snapping legs, the latter by biting at a hand or a thigh.

Click. Click. Press.

Revna’s thrown against the wall that she hits with a hiss but she lurches at the guard and bites him on the throat.

Snap.

The shackle falls on the ground.

“It’s gone! It’s gone, it’s gone, it’s—” Jungkook gasps when an arm curls around his waist, he and Taehyung rolling to the side as they avoid a fireball.

Taehyung springs up to a crouch. “Revna!”

Jungkook watches as Revna tries to make her way toward them but never reaches him as Dohyun seizes her by the neck. This is when something invisible throws Dohyun away, sending him to fly backward and lose his grip on Revna.

Revna rushes toward Jungkook to slither up his leg and disappear into the ruby.

Taehyung’s hand is trembling. Pure *terror* overtakes his face when he peers at Dohyun who’s wiping blood off mouth. Yet Taehyung still cradles Jungkook against him. He forms a ring in front of his mouth with his thumb and index finger as he tilts his head backward, aiming at the ceiling.

The room bursts outward, rocks flying in every direction as the breath destroys the entirety of the adjacent cells and corridor. Jungkook makes a move to protect his head but he doesn’t need to: Taehyung’s hands are already flattened atop Jungkook’s crown, shielding him from the falling rubble.

Silence floats in the air for a moment.

The support Taehyung provides vanishes.

Jungkook's eyes blink open.

A roar tears through the quietude, one that elicits a flurry of goosebumps on Jungkook's skin. His head darts up.

All Jungkook can see is the expense of the white skin and scales of Taehyung's chest as the gargantuan dragon towers over him. Taehyung swipes a claw in front of him, cleaving through some of the guards, and Jungkook can *hear* the wind whistling when the claws shred through air and flesh.

Seungwon along with two other dragonborns shift to their dragon counterpart. Jungkook stays where he is underneath Taehyung, sitting on his knees, a powerless witness to a dragon fight.

Before Taehyung can even try to fly away with Jungkook, the red dragon dives down and lands on Taehyung.

A staccato elevates in the field, resounding within Jungkook's mind and body as a whole. It becomes louder as Taehyung lowers his head to the ground. His jaw parts open, however nothing can be seen leaving Taehyung's mouth.

Jungkook peers ahead.

He sees more than he hears the way a horizontal line carves itself through the manor as *something* slices the large building in half like butter. The castle crumbles on itself and so do the few guards who were standing in the path of Taehyung's breath.

The staccato happens again. It does so twice this time as Taehyung breathes out a cone of fire and lightning.

Yells, cries and hollers elevate in the area, the manor in flames.

The guards that aren't burnt alive die on the spot when lightning hits them.

Taehyung breathes a fireball next, this time directing it at the green dragon who doesn't have the time to fully dodge it. The flames hit one of the front legs. Jungkook can't repress the shiver of glee that creeps up his spine at the pain howl that follows.

A movement catches Jungkook's attention in the corner of his eyes. "Left!"

Taehyung promptly turns to his left but it's too late for him to avoid Seungwon who crashes onto him. The two of them roll down the field. The safety blanket Taehyung had provided is gone now.

Jungkook scurries to his feet at the ten or more guards running toward him.

Pain flares in Jungkook's thigh but he ignores it in favor of calling Revna out. She slides out of the ruby to coil around his left arm while he grabs a hold of the dagger.

Jungkook leaps backward when a sword swipes toward him. He extends his arm as he does and Revna uses this opportunity to bite at the fool. Three other men soon surrounded Jungkook. He

ducks under a punch aimed his way then flips the dagger in his hand to deftly lunge forward and slash at the man's chest before kicking him on the stomach.

Jungkook rolls forward when a blade swooshes past his head. A knee on the ground and Revna back around his arm, Jungkook is too slow to evade the kick that slams against his ribs while a second man charges at him with a knife. Jungkook grabs the first guy by the sleeves and he doesn't know how he manages to muster that kind of strength, but he lifts and throws the man at the one with the knife, the two guards crashing down together.

After flopping on the ground to evade an axe aimed at his neck, Jungkook flattens his palms next to his head to raise on a handstand. He leaps backward and as he does he throws his dagger that lodges inside a guard's chest. He staggers when he lands on his wounded thigh but rushes toward the man to retrieve his dagger and sink it into the throat right as Revna's venomous fangs bore into a guard that had been about to slash Jungkook's back.

Jungkook won't be able to handle a dozen men fighting him — although the number has been lowered to seven now. It's only a matter of time before he's overpowered either by those he's battling against or the incoming ones. But he'll try his damnedest while looking for an opportunity to run away with Taehyung.

Jungkook dodges a punch, slashes an arm, dodges a sword and avoids some more. This is all he can do for the most part, unable to find any opening to strike back when surrounded by the guards relentlessly attacking him. Jungkook finds himself closer to Taehyung who's clashing with the other three dragons.

So Jungkook's attention is diverted from his own struggle for a fleeting second.

A shout escapes his mouth when a blade slices at the back of his already injured thigh.

He falls on his knees. He plants his dagger in someone's leg and he drags it down, tearing through the flesh as the guard falls down too.

Jungkook sees it then: the knife that goes for his throat. His body is too slow to avoid it, even if his mind is fast enough to see it approach.

A splatter of blood washes across Jungkook's face as a sound dies in his mouth.

A large boulder has flown through the masses of men caging him. It tears through the bodies while the one holding the knife is squashed by the large rock. Jungkook uses this moment of distraction Taehyung has granted him to drive the blade through the underside of a guard's chin.

The staccato erupts every now and then. A fire cone hits the red dragon that rolls across the grass to snuff the flames.

However a new wave of guards extricates themselves from the manor's ruins, encircling Jungkook anew. Jungkook's movements are slower by the second, the adrenaline coursing through him doing nothing to abate the fatigue that drapes over him.

A choked growl catches his attention. His head reflexively turns toward the source of the sound that he's certain to be Taehyung.

And he's right.

Seungwon's teeth are sunk into Taehyung's shoulder while the other two dragons do so on Taehyung's wings.

A hard object collides against Jungkook's leg. The hit is strong enough for Jungkook to feel something crack in his thigh. He's yanked backward by the hair, his back and head colliding on the ground. A man straddles him to grab a hold of his wrists while two more scratch and pull on his fingers to have him lose his grip around his dagger.

It works eventually when someone kicks his hands.

"Tie him up!"

"Bring the ropes!"

Jungkook is forced onto his front, and he wonders if they'll dislocate one of his shoulders from how his arms are painfully wrenched behind him. He struggles in the grasp but one of the guards kicks him in the jaw.

It's easy for the guards to subdue Jungkook then, his mind hazy.

The ropes are fastened around his chest, tying his arms and hands behind his back.

Taehyung tears through the red dragon's throat, killing him in an instant. It costs him a swipe of claws on his hind leg but he swivels around.

A sudden shrill, high-pitched noise shatters through the mayhem.

It rings between Jungkook's ears, however it's worse on the dragonborns, it seems.

Taehyung, Seungwon and the green dragon all snarl and roar in pain. Taehyung thrashes and falls. He tries to stand again, but the shriek becomes louder.

Jungkook notices a hiss near him. His gaze darts on Revna whose body contorts on the ground, her tongue darting out as she whines. "Revna! In the ruby! Revna!" He struggles against his bindings but it's useless and rewarded with a kick in his side.

The guards don't seem to pay attention to the basilisk, their attention focused on the dragons. So Revna manages to slither across the grass, sneaking between the guards' shoes to touch the ruby with her snout and revert inside it along with the dagger that she picks up on her way.

Seungwon and the green dragon shift back to human.

"Fucking cut it off!" Seungwon hollers.

Yumi laughs from where she's standing next to Dohyun, the latter unfazed by the chaos around him or the death of perhaps half of his men power. Yumi waves a hand toward Seungwon and the man who had been the green dragon. The latter two suddenly relax from where they had been on their knees and panting.

Taehyung, on the other hand, is still writhing and growling, blindly swinging his claws and spiky tail. The noise heightens. The dragon disappears, leaving place to Taehyung's human form. Taehyung tries to stand but Seungwon knees him in the stomach and pushes him down.

“Taehyung!”

Seungwon marches toward Jungkook. Taehyung stands to attack Seungwon but the lizard’s shriek blares louder.

Taehyung staggers on his knees, his palms flying to press against his ears and mouth opened around a silent scream. His shoulders roll as his hands drop to anchor on the ground.

Wings flare out of Taehyung's back.

Jungkook's view is obscured for a moment as Seungwon pauses in front of him to shove the guards away.

Seungwon grabs a handful of Jungkook’s strands to pull him up and slap him across the face, the smack feeling more like a punch. “You fucking whore. You don’t understand how badly you fucked up.”

Jungkook blinks the dizziness away, slumping down from where he's sitting. He wants to rise and fight, but his body refuses to cooperate. The ropes are too tight, constricting his movements. His thoughts are scattered, muddled by the hits his head has received, and overwhelmed by dismay.

He and Taehyung have failed.

They've failed and couldn’t escape.

“Watch.” Seungwon turns Jungkook so that they both face Taehyung. “This is the last time you’ll see him.”

Taehyung has ropes around him as well, binding his arms behind him. He’s dragged near a tree stump his wind breath had cut earlier.

“Yumi and other friends of mine have finalized everything,” Dohyun says. The lizard’s shrill lessens but it is still present as it rests right next to Taehyung. “They've improved the spell and runes. We can not only force your wings out as before, but Yumi can also narrow the seal further, where she will be able to enhance your healing breath. Your wings will heal and regrow faster,” he smiles and cups Taehyung’s cheeks. “You will give me so many assets, my little dove. We will thrive. You and I.”

“Stop,” Jungkook begs, even if Dohyun can’t hear him, his voice too quiet.

The two guards lower Taehyung above the tree stump, forcing him to rest his cheek on it, wings slumped over his back.

“Stop! Don’t—” Jungkook hisses when Seungwon’s shoe presses on a wound.

Taehyung is yards away from Jungkook but their eyes still lock together.

Taehyung’s eyes are widened and shaky, tears swimming in them. Quivers wrack through him as a drop slides down the bridge of his nose.

“Let him go!"

Dohyun responds with a laugh. He's holding a surgical hammer, heavy looking, made of metal.

Neither Taehyung or Jungkook have a second to prepare before Dohyun slams the hammer on Taehyung's right wing, the upper bone breaking with a snap.

"Ah..." Dohyun sighs with glee.

Taehyung writhes and Jungkook *swears* that he can feel a similar ache on his back, as if Taehyung's pain has become his own.

"Considering that it is the first pair, I suppose it is fine if it isn't meticulously removed. I have to admit I'm too impatient to take my time." Dohyun tosses the hammer to replace it with a sword that he retrieves from a guard's burnt hand.

Jungkook ignores the prickle of pain that flares on his scalp from Seungwon's grip. "I'll kill you. I'll fucking kill you."

"Shut your fucking mouth."

Jungkook's yell at Dohyun falls quiet at another kick in his stomach by one of the guards and a slap that dizzies him. Even through the haze, he catches the way Dohyun is holding the sword's handle with both hands. He sees how Dohyun lifts the weapon over Taehyung's right wing.

Jungkook watches with muted horror the way the blade lacerates through flesh and bone.

Taehyung does not scream. When a spasm runs through his body, the guards pin him harsher against the tree stump.

"Stop… Please," Jungkook whispers but he's not heard.

Arcane rumbles in his head.

"My precious dove... I have missed you so dearly." Dohyun rasps. He moves to stand next to Taehyung's left wing, Dohyun's cloudy eyes facing Jungkook now.

Jungkook does not think he has ever felt such unadulterated, ravaging hatred before.

Not for Seohyung or Sungmin.

Not even for Seungwon.

It rips the air out of his burning lungs.

Something somber and destructive slithers within him, churning and twisting there in his chest. Jungkook wonders if it might simply be this ever growing hunger to tear all asunder, to see deaths come to life for what Seungwon will do to Jungkook, for what has already been done to Taehyung.

Tremors run through his limbs, and they aren't only due to the distant nip he feels on his throat, or to the way Taehyung's fear coalesces with Jungkook's and Revna's, but also because of this agitated urge to protect, yet hopelessly being incapable to.

Jungkook will become Seungwon's prisoner if he comes out alive from this.

Taehyung will have his wings cut off.

Again.

And again.

And again.

And Jungkook is too powerless to do anything.

“Move and you die. I have many more dolls I can find.”

Jungkook doesn’t pay any more attention to Seungwon.

The tight reign Jungkook has over his arcane fizzles out the longer he watches Dohyun pet Taehyung’s head to fruitlessly soothe Taehyung’s silent cries. Jungkook’s arcane kindles with a delirium that blazes within him.

It wants to be free at last.

It feels like an entity, one aching to crawl out of his skin and gnaw its path through anything to get to Dohyun.

Jungkook still tries to resist his arcane. He can’t have Seungwon, let alone Dohyun, know that he’s a necromancer. He doesn’t even have any offensive spells anyway.

His arcane does not care, however. It whines and howls and cries and *pleads* to be let out.

Taehyung’s distraught gaze meets Jungkook’s.

The rupture that had begun to rip within Jungkook crackles. It sunders lower, deeper, to Jungkook's very core.

He wouldn’t be able to repress his arcane for much longer even if he wanted to, and so he lets it be.

His vision changes when his eyes take those of his necromancy. The world around him loses its hues: the colors become dull and darker to facilitate his ability to see lost souls. His arcane runs cold through his veins as it creeps up his arms, neck and throat.

No one is paying any heed to Jungkook.

All eyes are settled on Taehyung and Dohyun.

Dohyun drops the cloth he had been using to wipe the blood from the blade. The sword is in the air once more.

The world around Jungkook slows down. *It* becomes a boiling beast of madness, a tick away from imploding. The sounds are muffled by the resounding thud of his heart and the rupture grows and grows and grows and—

The sword cleaves through Taehyung’s second wing.

The rupture snaps Jungkook’s mind in half.

Seungwon yanks Jungkook's head back. “What the fuck is—”

Jungkook’s arcane is so violent that it renders him still, unable to move a single finger as black flames burst out of him. His eyes roll at the back of his head and it’s too much — *it’s too much, it hurts.* He can barely breathe under *Its* ferocity.

His consciousness recedes for a moment.

When Jungkook’s lids slowly flutter open, his head is tilted back, gaze aimed at the sky. Everything is even darker around him, the ambiance somber. His flames have thinly stretched above the area, in a dome that muffles the sunlight.

It’s as though a navy night has suddenly befallen on the land.

Jungkook's gaze finds Dohyun who’s staring back at him with an elated grin, Dohyun’s eyes wild.

Now everyone looks at Jungkook.

At the onyx flames that lick across the ground and aimlessly snap in any and every direction in the air. They don’t know where to go. They don't have a goal nor reason to exist.

It is lost.

The guards erupt into yells as some of the flames flicker toward them but the fire doesn’t burn. It never does. Seungwon vociferates some orders while he steps away from Jungkook.

Jungkook’s head lolls forward as he hunches over himself, his face a few inches from the ground.

The guards around him panic and run off. Seungwon and the other dragonborn shift into their counterpart. Some of the guards climb and desperately hold onto the green dragon that flies upward, flames reaching toward them. Not many succeed, however, the fifty or so of them remaining on ground.

Very few thoughts pass through Jungkook’s mind, all drowned by *‘Kill’* and *‘Protect’* and *‘Kill kill kill’*.

Some rumbling reverberates below Jungkook, and it feels as though the ground is about to collapse on itself and swallow Jungkook whole at once. Jungkook watches as the dirt facing him moves. Maybe an animal is trying to come out.

The yells have quietened. Jungkook’s arcane hasn’t, however, ravenous for *something*. The soil continues to cave and waver before it flattens once more as it stills. Then, something peeks out of it.

It’s a bone, more specifically a phalange.

It’s trailed by more bones.

Jungkook soon understands that a hand is emerging from the ground, the bones of the wrist and arm next. There’s no skin or flesh on them, only dirt.

The fingers rise toward his face.

They brush past his lips and upon his cheek, cold where they cradle his face, the bony thumb at the corner of his mouth. Jungkook doesn’t know how he comprehends the touch, but he realizes that

it’s asking for something.

Sustenance.

The fire that had left Jungkook withdraws, except for the dome that traps everyone. A heaviness weighs on his form once his arcane reaches him and dissolves inside him.

Jungkook’s mouth parts open. When he speaks, raven flames swirl out of his mouth, coiling around a word, then on the bones of the hand under him.

“*Respira.*”

The flames concentrate into a sphere within Jungkook. It blasts outward in an oscillating disk that stretches over the field and manor and deep into the forest. The flames spread and spread and they sink into the ground, as though absorbed by the latter.

They have an objective this time.

A beast to feed.

Nothing happens for a moment.

Jungkook looks away from the bony hand still cupping his cheek.

Taehyung is sitting in front of the tree stump, eyes riveted on Jungkook. His wings are laying limply by his sides, torn from him, the white of the scale tainted by carmine. Dohyun is next to him, the sword by his feet. Seungwon, Yumi and the other dragon are hovering in the sky, Jungkook notes, while the guards are frozen in place.

Yet an understanding passes through each one of them: they have nowhere to run. Not anymore.

Jungkook’s attention is brought beneath him at the sound of soil being dug.

The bones of a shoulder surfaces, then a skull does. Next are the collarbones, the ribcage, and soon the entire skeleton is out, standing in front of Jungkook. A similar spectacle occurs in the area fed by the flames. Skeletons crawl out of the ground left and right and *everywhere*. Some of the guards’ corpses also begin to stand.

It’s eerie, how salvation will be found in death.

More skeletons appear. Two dozen. Three dozen. Four dozen. It seems endless where Jungkook wonders if this manor has been built over what had once been a cemetery or mass graves.

The skeleton in front of him staggers forward, breathing out the flames. It’s holding a great axe that carves a path across the soil as it's dragged behind. The metal is cold against Jungkook when it slides along his spine and arms to cut the ropes binding him.

Jungkook wants something, and he does not need to speak to see it happen. He’s still seated on the ground when glacial phalanges grab his wrist to lift his right arm.

The handle of the axe is rested in his palm in a devout gesture, like an offering given to a lavishing god.

Jungkook does not have much strength left, but it holds no importance when his devotee makes up for it. Jungkook's arm and the skeleton's draw back together, giving them more momentum.

He aims.

One. Two. Three. Four.

A crack erupts in Jungkook's wrist at the power behind the skeleton's throw.

The great axe spins as it whirl through the air in a faint whistle. The blade is rusty, but it sinks through Dohyun's left arm, cleanly amputating it at the shoulder. The limb falls on the ground in a thud. Jungkook's gaze rises from it to settle on Dohyun's.

Dohyun looks scared, and Jungkook smiles.

Dohyun stares at his mutilated arm before his hand flies toward it to stop the flow of blood. "Yumi!" At his grunted command, Yumi flies down to help him climb on her familiar and hover higher in the sky.

Jungkook wants to do more. A lost arm does not suffice. "Get h—"

Pain suddenly shatters through Jungkook.

He gasps and hugs his own chest, wondering if it's being torn open. His vision blurs but he can still see the skeletons that walk across the ground, their steps curt and staggering.

Some of them are wearing clothes that cling onto their bones while others are falling to dust. The skeletons try to cross the distance between themselves and Dohyun. Half of them have weapons: bows, swords, axes. One even has a farmer's scythe and a pained laugh escapes Jungkook's mouth at the morbid irony.

The pain worsens by the second. A strained sob dies in Jungkook's throat as he pants for air, his fingers gripping onto his ribs then his thighs and his throat where agony pulsates. The skeleton behind him shuffles, trudging toward Dohyun. But Dohyun is too far up in the sky.

Out of reach.

The skeletons' goal is gone and so they halt, waiting for something.

A command.

"Kill."

The skeletons move. Their target shifts on the guards who step back or scramble to pick up their weapon.

The sight that follows suit is as ghastly as it is delightful.

The guards that have already died are fighting their own, brought to motion by Jungkook's necromancy. The skeletons lacerate a guard's navel, slit a throat or break an arm. The guards outnumber the skeletons at first, but it is soon reversed as they all die one by one, the group of fifty guards lowering to thirty, then twenty and soon ten.

The guards that are alive try to fight back. One of them cuts through a skeleton's arm but Jungkook’s fire slithers toward it to lift the bony arm and attach it back on the skeleton, a patch of flame coiling at the joint of the shoulder. Another guard severs a skull that rolls across the dirt, however the skeleton continues to walk toward the guard.

They have already died, after all.

The human guards continue to uselessly fight and lose. Seungwon joins them as he breathes a band of fire at some of the skeletons who strive to fulfill Jungkook’s command, unfazed by the dragon’s fire that doesn’t appear to be powerful enough to extinguish Jungkook’s or burn the skeletons to dust.

Jungkook falls on his side from the pain. His vision darkens on the edges as his gaze lays on Taehyung.

Then darkness swathes him.

Taehyung is about to sprint toward Jungkook when he sees the great axe next to him.

Dohyun is wounded.

If Taehyung has to kill him, it should be *now* when he finally has a chance to.

Taehyung makes a move to grab the great axe, however before he can, he catches in the corner of his eyes the way Seungwon dives toward Jungkook.

If Taehyung waste a second to kill Dohyun, then Jungkook will—

Taehyung springs to his feet and runs.

He turns midway into his dragon self and ignores the pain that pulsates in his back as the wounds worsen. He reduces the distance in two steps of his talons.

His teeth sink into Seungwon’s shoulder to hurl him away from Jungkook.

The flames subsist around the army of skeletons but they’re ebbing away, some of the skeleton crumbling into lifeless heaps of bones. They still allow Taehyung to gain time.

Taehyung can't fly away, so he instead grabs Jungkook in his talon and immediately runs toward the forest.

He comes to a halt when the sound of batting wings trails after him. He swivels around. The fire cones scorches all as he tilts his head from side to side: the grass, the guards’ bodies, the skeletons and the manor. This isn’t enough however. He needs distance before anything else.

So Taehyung collects every ounce that is left of his arcane even if it impedes the use of his healing breath. His consciousness dims for a moment but he shakes the haziness away. He collects his wind

and force breaths in his mouth. His jaw parts open to blast a cone that hits everything in front of him, and more importantly in the sky.

The manor and trees are flattened by the breaths that continue their path and propel the two dragons along with Yumi and the man with the scent so far down the horizon that they become dots in the sky. It dispels the strange curtain that had been cloaked over the area too, the sunlight bright.

Taehyung runs on the opposite side of where his opponents have been pushed away.

He does so in his dragon form at first to create as much distance as he can. Once deeper inside the forest, Taehyung uncurls his gnarled fingers to gently rest Jungkook on the ground and turns back to human. It'll be harder for the others to find him this way rather than in his dragon form.

He slings an arm under Jungkook's knees and another around his back. He lifts Jungkook and curses at the pain that shoots down his body from his shoulders. But he resumes his race anyway, his bare feet slamming on the dirt when he begins to sprint again.

Taehyung does not stop once even if he nearly tumbles every now and then. He tries not to think about whether the draining of his arcane will last for days only, weeks or months. If it'll ever come back.

Taehyung also tries to not ponder on the skeletons that have crawled from the ground and fought their opponents while protecting him from the few guards that had attempted to grab him.

Jungkook has raised the dead, and with it a series of questions in Taehyung's mind.

Chapter End Notes

The scene at the end with Jungkook is what prompted the creation of SLB and I FINALLY got the chance to write it 😭 Istg making Jungkook this type of warlock is the best decision I've made for SLB it's such a fun power to write and work with???

I hope you enjoyed this chapter and don't hesitate to comment, I'd love to hear your thoughts and read your reactions about this chapter XDDDD🤍 Forehead kisses to y'all and see you next weekend for chapter 16 👀🤍

PS: ✨COMFORT INCOMING✨ I think we all need it 😭💔

❧ Twitter

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook's fight at the manor made by taeoceans
❧ A moodboard of CH14/15 made by AS_jjk1997

Chapter 16: The Calm After The Storm

Chapter Summary

Taehyung and Jungkook have finally escaped the manor, however the path to safety hasn't been reached yet. A catharsis is granted, and discussions are held.

Chapter Notes

As you may be noticing, this chapter is extremely long and the longest one so far 🧍♀️ This is why I couldn't update yesterday because I had 29k aka 86 pages to entirely proofread and it took me houuuurs 😭 I hope you like this chapter though hehe 👀🤍

Not a rec song per se again but I kept listening to We Go Down Together by Dove Cameron & Khalid whenever Taekook were in the forest, and also in the emotional scene they have later on in the chapter!! I don't know how to explain but this song feels very SLB Taekook coded for some reasons, especially for the past couple chapters and I'm OBSESSED with it 😭

And happy a 1000 kudos to Silver Lined Bones too 😭🤍I NEVER expected that at all so thank you very very much for your support 🤍

Cw:

1) blood, violence
2) graphic depiction of violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hyuna?"

"Why are we here when we should be looking for Taehyung and Jungkook?" Jimin snips, the small ink dragon chirping on his shoulder. Yoongi is here along with Hoseok, the three of them entering the bedroom of a brothel.

"This is why we're here, Jimin," Yoongi says.

"Hyuna?" Hoseok calls out again. He freezes on his spot as he stares inside a room that had once been beautifully full of plants, yet is now tainted by the blood pooling on the floor and splattered across the walls. "Hyuna!"

The three of them race inside the greenhouse.

Hyuna is propped against a wall, holding some leaves against where there had once been an arm, the limb now cut off at the elbow.

Hoseok rushes to her. He crouches by her side, his hands uselessly hovering above her as he takes in the plethora of wounds littering her body. She must have been in this state for a while, perhaps days, if the dry and coagulated blood on some gashes are any hint.

“By the Elders.” Hoseok lifts her head and pushes aside some of the red strands to have a better look at her bruised face. “Hyuna?”

Hyuna’s lids flicker. Her gaze meets Hoseok’s for a second before she winces in pain and glances down at her arm.

“Hyuna, what happened?”

“My angels,” Hyuna rasps, tears sliding down her cheeks. “Are they okay? Please, tell me my angels are alright.”

“They’re fine,” Hoseok reassures. “I asked if you were here and everyone said you wanted to be left alone, and that your door had been locked shut for a couple days.”

Hyuna heaves a trembling sigh as she nods.

“Does anyone have a healing potion?”

Yoongi lowers next to Hyuna as well. He produces a vial from his coat that he hands to Hoseok. “The wounds are too grievous to entirely heal them, but it’ll work as a temporary fix. She should see a proper healer.”

Hoseok flicks the cap of the vial and helps Hyuna drink from it, tilting her head back. The potion immediately takes effect. She relaxes against the wall.

“Some— Some man came here with other people, and a warlock,” Hyuna starts. “The man’s the leader, I think. He left yesterday, but the others stayed until… They came through a purple door."

“When was that?”

“Two days ago? I’m not sure. He said his name is Dohyun and he—” A sob catches in Hyuna’s throat. “He said that I had information about a client. I never give anything away, you know that, but then he started hurting my children….” Her gaze drags across the room. More than half of the plants are burnt to a crisp or were sliced and crushed. “And then me, and I couldn’t— I tried to not say anything, but—”

Hoseok tugs Hyuna in his arms as she cries on his shoulder. “It’s alright. You did what anyone else would have done.”

“What information did Dohyun want?” Yoongi interjects, tone clipped. “What have you given him?”

“He asked what I knew about the boy that was with you. Not the gruff one, the other.” Hyuna peers at Hoseok. “I don’t know how he knew you visited me, but he wanted to know what I had found out, and I told Dohyun what I'd discovered.”

“What, *exactly.* "

Hoseok glares at the warlock and it takes all of his self-control to not put the man through a wall. “Give her a fucking minute."

“The kind boy,” Hyuna answers and turns her head to peer at Yoongi. “He’s your friend?”

“He’s— Yeah, he’s like a brother to me. He’s been gone for days now and we’ve been looking for him but haven’t found any clue as to where he could be. We suspect that he along with the gruff one were taken away by Dohyun.”

“God…” Hyuna shudders. She takes Yoongi’s hand between his own. “I pray you find them promptly. I won’t be able to help much, but if there is anything you need, do not hesitate to ask me. This— This Dohyun man is…” She shakes her head and lets go of Yoongi to grip onto Hoseok.

“Hyuna, please, what have you told Dohyun?”

“I told him that the kind boy is a necromancer.”

“Fucking bastard.” Jimin's arcane swirls in his breath pouch, tamed for now but he doesn’t know for how long.

“Dohyun being aware of Jungkook's necromancy worries me as well,” Dahee says.

“What’s more worrying is that ten people know about it. Hoseok and Seokjin too now,” Yoongi snarls. “ *No one* was supposed to know. No one except for Namjoon and I.”

“Jungkook has trusted us with this knowledge, Yoongi.” Junhyun rests a hand on Yoongi’s shoulder. “I promise that it will remain safe between us. With Hoseok and Seokjin as well.”

“Dohyun could do to any of you what he has done to Hyuna to gather more information about Jungkook. And then what? Rare are those who can endure let alone survive torture for days.”

“My son has. For months,” Dahee interjects. Yoongi subdues. “Nonetheless, we must focus on our task at hand. Jimin, Seokjin and I will leave for the Emerald Vale. The Elders have provided us with a trinket that will aid us in detecting runes. It has located a few up north, which could perhaps be where Taehyung and Jungkook are being held. We first need to investigate, and remain level-headed.” Dahee pauses next to Jimin, her hand grasping his. “We will be flying to those runes to identify their properties and make sure they aren’t damaging to dragonborns.”

“The latter had been the reason why we could not simply barge in to retrieve Taehyung the first time he had been taken away,” Junhyun adds.

“In the meantime, the rest of you will continue your searches regarding the purple door Hyuna has mentioned,” Dahee carries on and peers at Hoseok and Seokjin as they enter the room.

“We should be able to find it in a few days. Eden is huge so it’s taking a while,” Hoseok sighs. “And I need to meet some people to speed up the process.”

Dahee draws a curt nod. “Remember to remain together. Do not stay alone for one second.”

“I’ll be working on spells.” A flurry of ravens leaves his hand, one flying to each person in the room. “If anything happens, you can contact me through my ravens. All you have to say is ‘home’, and it will come back to me along with anything you may have told it.”

A chorus of *‘Understood’* elevates in the area.

For all Jimin knows, Taehyung is going through the same nightmare he had six years ago. He presses a hand against his mouth and before he realizes it, he’s engulfed against a broad chest.

“We will find him, my son,” Junhyun says. “I promise.”

“I know. I just hope that— I hope he’s not being hurt like before.”

“Taehyung is strong. Let us not forget that.”

Taehyung has no idea of where he and Jungkook are, nor where they are going.

A little over two hours have passed since they’ve escaped the manor, and to Taehyung’s surprise, they don’t appear to be followed by Seungwon, Yumi or anyone else.

Jungkook is still out cold.

His wounds worry Taehyung among a plethora of other concerns, like the fact that Jungkook has lost a lot of blood and seems to have a broken wrist on top of how alarmingly pale his skin is. However the Prince is still breathing, even if Taehyung has to pause for a few seconds here and there to check on Jungkook’s pulse.

Taehyung continues to race through the forest.

The hours elapse, from morning to noon to night.

Taehyung has been changing his rhythm to one he can maintain for days without exerting himself to unconsciousness. He runs for an hour and a half, then walks for thirty minutes before resuming his jog.

He and Jungkook have left perhaps 10 or 12 hours ago now.

The forest is quiet around him, only disturbed by the nightly life that rustles leaves and temporarily blares alarm bells in his mind.

Taehyung’s arcane hasn’t come back.

Not a sliver of it can be felt in his breath pouch. He tries to not cave into the terror of it all, however as the night falls upon him and Jungkook, the glacial winter air wraps around them in a tight glove, and an additional matter adds to the pile of worries.

Taehyung halts at a large tree trunk that has been carved into by time and the forests' inhabitants, providing a shelter from the cold in a makeshift cave. He starts a small campfire, the inside of the tree also serving to partially hide the flames while keeping in the fleeting warmth. The temperature must have reached lower than zero by now, and Taehyung has to keep himself and Jungkook warm.

The burning wood sticks help, thankfully.

Taehyung carries Jungkook to lay him down near the campfire. He needs to take a break, both to rest his aching muscles but also to check up on Jungkook's injuries.

Jungkook looks even more ashen next to the flames that cast an orange hue across his skin.

Taehyung begins his examination, starting by Jungkook's head that he palpates. There are a couple bumps there and Taehyung wonders if they may be the sign of something more grievous happening underneath, like an internal bleeding.

Taehyung rests Jungkook's head back on the soft soil. His fingers hover over Jungkook's face that is covered in blood.

After a quick scan of their surroundings, Taehyung takes Jungkook in his arms and makes his way toward the sound of a stream.

It takes him a few minutes to reach a sinuous river.

He deposits the Prince next to it. Jungkook's pullover is still damp and hardened in some places by the blood soaking it.

Taehyung carefully slides it off. "Fuck." He hisses when the frigid water comes into contact with his hands as he cleans the top. Once done, he wedges the shirt between two heavy rocks and sits next to Jungkook to get to work.

Taehyung dips a hand in the water then cups the side of Jungkook's head with his other one to begin cleaning the blood from Jungkook's face.

Taehyung narrows his attention on this, on washing away the grim while inspecting the severity of the injuries. It gives him something to focus on other than the man with the scent's presence looming over him. It detracts him from the agonizing pain in his shoulder blades too.

His thumb and index gently swipe over Jungkook's cheeks and forehead, then the nose and shut lids, finishing with the lips marked with several cuts. It's a lot more blatant now how harmed Jungkook's face is, where purple bruises have bloomed everywhere, one so dark that it looks nearly black. However Taehyung continues, his cold fingers meticulous when they reach a wound he brushes with the water.

Taehyung ignores the cuts on the scalp. He doesn't want to potentially make them worse. Instead, he rinses Jungkook's chest next. He's not too thorough about it even if he can't help but unconsciously attempt to clean every single trace of blood on the skin, his fingers itching to properly aid, to care better, but he doesn't want to spend too much time in the open area and away from the campfire.

The pulp of Taehyung's fingers probes at Jungkook's ribs, feeling for the bones. Aside from the sparse benign cuts, nothing seems to be broken.

Taehyung heaves a relieved sigh.

He tears a piece of the hem of his pants. It's a bit dirty but it's all he has to dry Jungkook. He hasn't managed to remove all the blood, however a good chunk of it is gone now.

After briefly cleaning himself, Taehyung plops down and stares at the reckless prince.

Jungkook has risked so much to save them.

He and the basilisk have both saved Taehyung's life when Taehyung has done nothing to deserve this. There's a lot Taehyung wants to say, and he doesn't know if he'll ever find the right words or moment to do so, but it doesn't matter for now.

Taehyung notices a few cuts here and there on Jungkook's legs, the worst being the stab wound on the left thigh along with a swelling that may be due to a fracture. He peels the fabric off the pants to clean the deep wound. Water won't do anything to prevent an infection, but it's a start.

Taehyung retrieves the pullover, squeezes the water from it and he hauls Jungkook in his arms to walk back to the campfire.

He's wary on his way there but he does not catch any particular sign that someone else has been near it. Taehyung props the pullover on two sticks that he plants in the soil near the flames.

Taehyung breathes in his palms that he rubs together and sprawls over the fire. Shudders keep wracking through him one after another. He warms himself for a few minutes and, once he doesn't feel an inch away from death anymore, Taehyung crouches next to Jungkook.

"Hey, basilisk."

Navy hues shift in the ruby, so Taehyung knows that the basilisk is in there and he says as such. When he does, the basilisk's head comes out of the ruby. She hisses at Taehyung then reverts back inside.

"Basilisk, I need your help. And his dagger."

Revna hisses at Taehyung again when she comes out and this time, she's holding the dagger in her mouth. She slides down, not without pinning Taehyung with what he can qualify as a snide look. She raises her head and the upper part of her body to twist her head, the point of the blade aimed at the ground. The basilisk then drags the tip of the dagger into the soil, drawing a straight line where she attaches a dome and then another line.

"R?" Taehyung says, confused.

The basilisk drops the dagger. She slowly turns to peer up at Taehyung. The serpent isn't glaring, per se. She can't. But Taehyung can recognize a peeved snuff when he hears one.

"What?" Taehyung glances at the 'R' again and something clicks in his head. "Oh. Revna?"

Revna erupts into a series of clicks of tongue. Her body undulates, her head swaying from side to side.

"Alright. Revna. I need to pick up a few things for his wounds, but I'd rather not jostle him around too much. I haven't heard or seen anyone, so it should be fine if I step away for a bit, but I need you

to keep an eye on him. If anything happens, hiss, and I'll hear you."

The snake nods before laying her head on Jungkook's chest.

Taehyung grabs the dagger and rises on his feet to start his search.

He doesn't wander too far from the campfire, always keeping it in his peripheral vision and straining his ears for any sound.

Taehyung collects the necessary herbs and ingredients along with a piece of tree trunk curved enough to serve as a bowl. A sigh of relief leaves his mouth when he stumbles on a stem of nixes. He picks the green and red one, and he also grabs a large rock that he carves for a few minutes to create a makeshift bucket.

"Heard or saw anything?" Taehyung asks Revna after filling the bucket with water from the river. Revna shakes her head, moving away from Jungkook to sniff at the plants Taehyung has brought.

The forest is awfully silent, not easing an ounce of Taehyung's trepidation.

The most unnerving aspect is how quiet Jungkook is.

No matter what Taehyung may feel regarding Jungkook, he has grown used to the Prince's snarky quips and curious questions. It's odd to see Jungkook so silent.

So lifeless

It's frightening enough to have Taehyung rush by Jungkook's side and lower over him even if it tugs at the tears in his back.

He presses his ear over Jungkook's heart, as Revna had done seconds ago.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

Taehyung exhales and straightens up. He gathers the herbs and nixes bells to prepare an antiseptic ointment that will also aid in partially stopping the bleeding, a sufficient temporary solution.

Taehyung should put some on his shoulders as well, but there won't be enough pomade for him and Jungkook, and it's not like he can reach his shoulders on his own. At least the lacerations of his wings have stopped bleeding for the most part, except for when he moves his arms too much.

Taehyung settles on Jungkook's left. Then with slow and meticulous motions, he starts slathering the pomade on the cuts littering Jungkook's face.

He pays more attention to the stab wound that he cleans once more with the water before covering it with the antiseptic. He also rips another piece of his pants to fasten it around Jungkook's thigh. The Prince's skin is pebbling and Taehyung retrieves the now dried pullover to slowly pass the sleeves over Jungkook's arms, sliding the rest of it around the chest.

It takes a bit of maneuvering and a lot of carefulness, however Taehyung manages to sit Jungkook up. He curls an arm around Jungkook's shoulders to keep him upright and puts some ointments on the two cuts at the back of the scalp. He doesn't linger too much, his fingers shaking from the ambient chill.

Taehyung's growing cold again, barely able to feel his naked feet. "Fucking freezing." He's not used to being cold, having always relied on his fire breath to keep himself warm. Being dressed only in thin pants with no shirt in the middle of one of the coldest winters doesn't leave him with much time to find a solution for this as well.

Jungkook is warming up though, especially thanks to Revna who's enveloped around Jungkook's shoulders.

"Can you be more around his throat?" Taehyung asks and Revna promptly obeys. "Have to keep the extremities warm. His feet are fine." He glances at Jungkook's shoes and socks. Taehyung had thought of putting them on for himself but had decided against it.

Taehyung shuffles to sit crossed legs behind Jungkook while still keeping him upright. He holds Jungkook against him, back to chest, and he wraps his arms around Jungkook's navel, soaking up onto the warmth the Prince emanates.

The shivering is constant by now, mingling with the exhaustion.

Taehyung will have to move again soon. He can't afford to sleep yet. He still yearns for warmth and respite, and he blames it on those when he buries his face in the dip of Jungkook's neck, shielding himself from the faint breeze.

He startles when something silky touches his cheek.

Revna watches him for a second before she coils around his and Jungkook's neck.

The three of them stay there for a while, the campfire alleviating Taehyung's tremors little by little.

He unwraps his hands from where they're tangled over Jungkook's navel to wrap them around the wrists. He tugs the sleeves of the pullover so the fabric engulfs Jungkook's freezing hands and he traps them between his own, both to keep himself and Jungkook warm.

Revna makes a noise that sounds like a whine from where her head is laying atop Taehyung's shoulder.

"It's weird he's so quiet, huh?"

Revna responds with a click that Taehyung assumes to be one of agreement.

"No pouty whining, no petulant huffs, no *'you're such a prick' ...*"

Taehyung pauses and he slides his head down so his forehead rests atop Jungkook's shoulder.

"He's annoying but… The silence is even more."

Revna moves. Taehyung lifts his head to watch her. She bumps her snout near one of Jungkook's scratches on the cheek before doing the same on Jungkook's chest. Taehyung isn't certain he understands what she's trying to explain, but he talks nonetheless.

"He lost a lot of blood, that's the most worrying part. I don't know how much but it must be nearing a fifth, maybe more. The ointment helps with that. It'll stop most of the bleeding. We just need to find a village or a small town as soon as possible. We should get back to moving. Now," Taehyung says, growing more fidgety the more he talks.

A few minutes later, and after untangling himself from Jungkook, gathering their ‘belongings’ and snuffing out the campfire while hiding the traces of their stay, Taehyung resumes his jog.

It’s not too difficult to navigate through the forest even at night. The moonlight gives enough luminosity to see the ground and avoid the trees.

His pace of running and walking goes on until late morning.

As noon begins, Taehyung only stops once when he stumbles on another river that he drinks from.

He sits Jungkook against his chest after grabbing a tree's lead. He holds onto Jungkook’s nape to tilt his head back then presses a finger on Jungkook’s lower lip to part his mouth open. Taehyung scoops some water with the leaf that he pinches so that only a narrow thread of water slides down Jungkook’s throat.

He halts and waits.

When Jungkook reflexively swallows the water, Taehyung continues to hydrate him.

Taehyung had caught a rabbit earlier amidst his path. He could have gone for a bigger prey but he doesn’t want to risk hunting too far from Jungkook or leaving too many traces of his passage. The rabbit is already skinned and cooked, Taehyung having already eaten a third of it while giving another to Revna.

He’s now contemplating what to do with Jungkook.

His musing lasts for a minute before he rips a thin, tiny piece of the meat. His hand slides from the nape to hold Jungkook’s jaw, Jungkook’s head supported in the crook of Taehyung’s elbow. Taehyung places the thread of rabbit on the back of Jungkook’s tongue, all under Revna’s watchful gaze who’s loosely wrapped around Taehyung’s arm. He takes the leaf and washes down the food with water.

Taehyung pauses, anticipating Jungkook to cough, but when it does not happen, he blinks then peers at Revna. “I guess that works?” He does it again as Revna slithers toward the river to drink.

The feeding process is slow, but it’s strangely calming. Taehyung would go as far as saying that it’s pleasant, for some reasons, and so he continues to feed Jungkook nonetheless, his mind wandering. He imagines that if Jungkook had been awake, he would be complaining about being too hurt to eat on his own and demand for Taehyung to feed him. Taehyung wonders if he’d cave in and do as asked.

He probably would.

Even if it’d be infuriating, Taehyung wishes for Jungkook to do this; the forest wouldn’t be so eerily silent and lonely anymore.

The temperature tonight must have reached -8°. Probably lower.

Taehyung has been struggling to move his limbs at this point and his grip on Jungkook is faltering too much for him to continue walking.

They've escaped two days ago now, this night being the bridge between the second and third day.

There's a vast dip in the roots of a tree underneath a hill. It's a bit like a cave, much better than the first area he had stopped at.

Taehyung makes a bonfire there, uncaring of being spotted in the forest. Completing his task is tedious, his motions lacking coordination as his limbs labor to follow his brain's commands. The tips of his fingers are growing a worrying blue on top of his cough and the sweat that wets his back and neck. Taehyung isn't certain on what could be worse: fighting through a potential infection due to his untreated wounds, or growing sick from the cold. Or both.

He doesn't want to think of the worst, but he suspects he may be developing some kind of hypothermia. His lungs feel heavy, impeding his already strenuous breathing. At least the glacial air helps appease the pain in his shoulders. Plus Jungkook is fairing a lot better than Taehyung is, which is another relief he clings onto.

Taehyung lays Jungkook inside the alcove of the 'cave', at the far back of it. It's a vulnerable place to be at, but Taehyung needs to warm up the area as much as he can.

"S—Shit."

The shivers are relentless, to a point where Taehyung's teeth clack together every now and then. He can barely feel his extremities, whether it being his feet, his hands or his ears, everything worsened by the exhaustion of having not slept for the past two days.

Taehyung's most urgent problem is the cold.

He lays down behind Jungkook who's on his side, the fire feet away behind Taehyung. Its flames heat up the area but it's not enough to combat the glacial breeze that seeps into each and every pore of his skin.

He exhales through his mouth, his breath misty and interrupted by a coughing fit.

He shuffles closer to Jungkook until his naked chest touches Jungkook's back. He curls an arm over Jungkook's waist while his other one sneaks under, and he sprawls his hands on the navel to bring the Prince tighter against him. Taehyung sighs at the sliver of warmth Jungkook exudes.

Taehyung isn't really comfortable being so close to Jungkook. Or he doesn't think he is, he's not certain of much right now.

"Th—Think this is, p—pretty fucking bad," Taehyung stammers to Revna and even she is warm compared to how frigid Taehyung is. She leaves Jungkook to entirely curl around Taehyung's neck and throat. "Can't w—warm up. At all."

Taehyung might lose his damn mind if after surviving the man with the scent a second time, he dies from something as stupid as the damn cold.

However, Taehyung's body is shutting down.

He can feel it, but there's nothing he can do to prevent it.

His vision blurs as his lids flutter, his respiration shallow. It's as though he's swaying and about to fall even if he can feel the freezing ground under him. Revna nudges her snout on Taehyung's temple.

Taehyung doesn't want to fall asleep. He doesn't know if he'll wake up again. He does anyway, his consciousness fizzling away.

Jimin, Dahee and Seokjin are passing by the Seven Isles, soon entering the Emerald Vale.

It isn't the first time they're scouting the area since Taehyung and Jungkook have disappeared, but the Emerald Vale is incredibly grand.

Barely a week and a half has passed, yet Jimin is afraid that Taehyung may have suffered more in that short time than in the six months he was gone years ago.

Jimin reassures himself with what Yoongi keeps telling him.

Taehyung isn't alone. Jungkook is with him, and the Prince of Amaris is a capable man. *But still.* Taehyung has never spoken to Jimin about what had really happened six years ago aside from the fact that humans had betrayed him, and that he had nearly died. All that Jimin had heard about Dohyun had been through Elder Miseon who had seemed as scarred by Taehyung's disappearance as everyone in his family and Vanae had been.

Elder Miseon has lived a long life, the woman hundreds of years old like the Oracle and every other Elders, yet she had said that Dohyun had been the most despicable, horrifying being she had ever met in her life, a monster that should have never been born.

Jimin shakes his head to dispel his aggravating thoughts. He can't afford to lose his wits like he had last time. It did not help at all. *He* had not.

He flies further north-east while Seokjin does so at the west and Dahee straight up north.

Several things suddenly catch Jimin's attention.

He stills, hovering in the sky while peering ahead.

What Jimin witnesses can only be described as the aftermath of a bloodshed.

The trees, soil and bushes are entirely upturned, flattened so far down the horizon that Jimin can't see the end of what had once been a patch of the forest. There seems to be ruins of a castle scattered everywhere, the building demolished both by fire and some sort of clean cut.

A roar leaves Jimin's throat, calling out for Dahee and Seokjin who soon join him.

The three of them land in the middle of the ground and shift to their human self.

Hope mingles with anguish as Jimin swivels on his feet, taking in the sight before him, and he can notice the same conflict of emotions flashing on Dahee's face.

“Is this—”

“This is Taehyung,” Dahee interrupts, her voice strained. “I know— I know it’s him. It’s my son.”

“What the fuck happened?”

Seokjin walks toward a pile of black dust. There are more on the ground, dozens of dark bumps littering the area. Some have melted metal amidst them. He crouches in front of a heap and grabs a pinch of the charred dust, bringing it to his nose before dropping it and wiping his fingers on his pants. “This is strange.”

“Strange is a mild way to put it. What has happened here…”

“What about Taehyung? He must be close, right? Only he could do this. Look at the building. It was cut in half."

“Several days have passed,” Dahee observes while peering at the burnt bodies, some missing limbs, others devoured by vultures. “We must leave and reconvene with the rest of the group.”

“But Taehyung—”

“We need more of us, Jimin. Taehyung and Jungkook may be in danger, however up til now, we have not discovered anything aside from the *aftermath* of a fight. If Taehyung and Jungkook truly are the instigators of this, they are long gone by now, whether because they have escaped or have been found by Dohyun. We need more of us to scour around this manor.”

“Yeah, alright,” Jimin nods. “We should hurry.”

“Let us fly back to our meeting point.”

Taehyung awakens with a startle.

It doesn’t take long for his mind to be assaulted with the memories of the past few days: the kidnapping, the fight, the escape and the run.

He sits up, a curse tumbling out of his lips when pain bursts in his shoulder blades. He blinks to fend off the remnants of his sleep as he glances around. It’s still night, however the bonfire is extinguished, only the embers producing some semblance of light. Taehyung must have fallen asleep for hours, in spite of his better judgment.

Taehyung groans and stands. A vertigo overtakes him and he staggers forward, catching himself on the edge of a rock.

His mind is still muddled by everything. He’s thirsty too and he walks toward where he had left their belongings to grab the bucket of water that he drinks from. He makes his way toward the Prince who still remains as uncannily immobile as he has been for the past days.

Taehyung crouches to move Jungkook onto his back. He checks the pulse at the throat but it doesn't suffice to ease the apprehension and so he rests his head above Jungkook's heart.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

It's slow. Slower than before, however still beating.

Taehyung takes the leaf he's been using to hydrate Jungkook, however a sudden realization hits him like a freight train.

Taehyung isn't cold anymore.

At all.

It's not due to the fire that has been snuffed out a while ago, and neither is it due to the winter's cold that has not unexpectedly vanished.

Taehyung can feel his arcane swirl in his breath pouch.

A shaky sigh escapes his mouth. He lowers on the ground and his lids fall shut. He visualizes a circle in his mind that he splits into seven segments. He adds an arrow to it that he twirls as it rotates over the several breaths he can manipulate. The arrow settles on the fire aspect, even if it has already been there. When Taehyung opens his eyes, he blows out a puff of air and he watches how it's mingled with small flames that flicker in the air and disappear.

Taehyung's brows furrow. He stifles a sob and slumps forward on his arms, resting his forehead on them. "By the Elders…"

Taehyung had been convinced that he wouldn't live to see another day after falling asleep in the frigid cold, however his arcane has saved him.

It's back.

He represses his tears as an unbridled relief swathes him.

Something touches his balled up hand and he raises his head to peer at Revna. Her head is tilted to the side, her confusion evident.

"I nearly died but my arcane is back. We'll be fine."

Revna makes this same little motion — *dance?* — as her body undulates while she clicks her tongue. She grabs Taehyung's wrist between her mouth to tug it toward Jungkook, then she lets go and peeps up at Taehyung.

Jungkook's skin is glacial, shudders coursing through his limbs. Taehyung spreads the warmth of his fire breath so it wraps around himself, Jungkook and Revna both. Taehyung does not try to summon his healing breath on top of the fire one. He doesn't want to risk exhausting his arcane when it has *just* manifested itself anew. Keeping himself and Jungkook warm is more important.

After giving some water to Jungkook and grabbing their stuff, Taehyung carries the Prince and begins to run again.

They're not out of trouble quite yet — if at all, really — but Taehyung can't repress the smile that tugs at his lips when the winter breeze does not affect him anymore. Jungkook is even regaining some colors, and the slumber Taehyung unwillingly had gone into has granted him enough energy to galvanize his run.

Noon arrives and brings a warm sunlight that bathes the group.

Revna is curled around Taehyung's neck, her head atop his crown. Taehyung had protested at first, but he's too happy and hopeful to be arguing with anyone, let alone the stubborn basilisk.

Taehyung doesn't know if Seungwon and the rest have given up on finding him, but he still blends his scent and steps with those of the animals populating the forest.

He gives themselves a break late afternoon to feed himself and Jungkook, then he resumes his trek. The exhaustion grows heavier by the hour but it's only at night that Taehyung allows another rest.

"Revna," Taehyung calls after cleaning Jungkook's wounds and applying a new layer of the antiseptic ointment. "I need to sleep for a couple hours again. You'll be fine keeping an eye out?"

Revna emits a sound as she nods. She coils near the campfire, her gaze steady as it settles on the forest.

Similar to the previous night, Taehyung lays down on his side and tucks Jungkook against his chest. It's a lot more difficult to fall asleep, however. Their safety only resides in Revna and Taehyung's instincts.

Taehyung glances at the basilisk.

She snuffs at him and makes a click of her tongue that Taehyung has heard her make whenever she argues with Jungkook. "You… You *have* to keep watch, alright?"

Revna hisses at him before turning her head away from him.

"Alright."

Taehyung closes his eyes, his aching muscles relaxing.

A yell tears through the quietude.

Taehyung springs up as a weak staccato rumbles in his throat. His eyes dart around. He doesn't see or hear anything in the forest.

Another grunt elevates in the area.

Taehyung peers down at Jungkook, the source of the sound.

Jungkook is awake and laid on his back. Tears slide down his temple, disappearing in his hair. He's panting and wincing, thrashing on the ground before falling still.

“Revna, is Yumi here?”

Revna shakes her head.

“Viper.” Taehyung shuffles on his knees to hunch over Jungkook. “What’s going on?”

Jungkook gasps. His hands hover his chest, fingers curled as he lifts his head to peer down at himself. His head is about to fall back down but Taehyung quickly softens the fall with his palm.

“G—God,” Jungkook sobs and writhes, his fingers clutching at his pullover. “M’dying, m—my—”

Taehyung lays Jungkook’s head on a patch of cushiony moss Taehyung had torn earlier and bundled up in an alternative pillow. He gently pushes Jungkook’s hands away, mindful of the swollen wrist. He tugs the hem of the pullover up and surveys Jungkook’s navel. He drags his fingers up and down the ribs and on the abdomen but he still can't feel anything alarming. Some of the bruises are even turning yellow, a sign of healing.

“There’s nothing."

Jungkook shakes his head. “I don’t unders— It hurts. Hurts, make it, s—stop.” His fingers scratch over his belly, as though trying to appease something there.

Taehyung pulls Jungkook’s hands away. “There’s nothing. You’re fine. I check your wounds several times a day. You’ve got no broken ribs, no internal bleeding either because you would have died already if you had any. You’re fine, Viper.”

A series of coughs are wrenched out of Jungkook’s throat. His hands fly to it as he wheezes and is seemingly choking on something. Taehyung helps Jungkook sit up, a palm supporting Jungkook’s back while the other cups the underside of Jungkook’s chin.

Without any preamble, Taehyung slips two fingers in Jungkook’s mouth to part it open and have a better view of the back of Jungkook’s throat.

Still nothing.

Taehyung retracts his hand. “Viper, I don’t—” Taehyung catches Jungkook in time when the latter passes out and slumps in his hold.

Silence fills the forest anew.

Revna makes some sounds as she nudges Jungkook’s cheek, then his temple and forehead.

“Do you know?”

She shakes her head.

Taehyung lays Jungkook back down, questions flaring in his mind.

Is it a consequence of one of Yumi’s spells? Or is it one prompted by Jungkook’s necromancy?

Taehyung spends the next hour verifying the entirety of Jungkook’s wounds and skin, looking for a rune or anything else he may have missed during his prior inspections.

He still finds naught.

A day later, Taehyung halts at a tall tree that towers over the others.

After leaving Jungkook to Revna's watch, Taehyung climbs up the trees not without difficulties, blood trickling down his back from reopening his gashes. Once at the top, he shields his eyes from the bright sunlight and observes his surroundings.

He's high above the canopy.

His eyes widen when he sees the shadows of buildings and a bridge south-west.

The Seven Isles.

"Fuck." The relief swells and so does the exhilaration at being so damn close to a city and people.

And his family.

He climbs back down, leaping from a branch to land on the ground. "We're near the Seven Isles," he announces to Revna, whose head darts up. "Maybe two days away from it with the rhythm we're at? Less if I run for longer? The meeting point we had agreed on is closer to us by an hour or so. So we'll go there first, and then we'll see."

Jungkook has woken up twice in the morning again with the same pained sounds before blacking out seconds later.

Taehyung still has no idea of what is going on with Jungkook. He assumes that it's related to his necromancy and the fact that Jungkook has *raised the dead*, but Taehyung hasn't taken the time to ponder further on the issue.

He needs to remain focused on one matter: reaching a safe spot.

The sun dims the lower it descends, the sunset soon replaced by the night sky.

Taehyung is skinning the two rabbits Revna has caught and brought to him when Jungkook eventually wakes up again.

Taehyung drops the dagger and rushes toward Jungkook, the latter writhing on the ground as he tries to sit up. "Easy." Taehyung gently pushes Jungkook back down. "Don't move."

Jungkook is clutching his right leg, a whine dying in his throat. "My leg… My leg's gone, s'gone. It hurts so much, I can't—"

“Your leg isn’t gone."

Tremors wrack through Jungkook as he’s seemingly fighting back a pain that isn’t really there, however he looks more conscious than how he has been this far, and so Taehyung grabs a hold of Jungkook’s chin to tilt his head, Jungkook’s bleary gaze meeting Taehyung’s.

“What do you feel?”

“Like… *God*... Like my leg’s c—cut off. It hurts so much, my arm too,” Jungkook slurs.

The limb Jungkook is gripping at isn’t even the one that has been injured during their escape.

Understanding begins to dawn on Taehyung.

Jungkook watches Taehyung through his tears. His left hand raises but he winces and drops it a second later.

Taehyung gets the message anyway. Or he hopes he does.

Taehyung sits crossed legs next to Jungkook, then, careful so as to not jostle the injured leg, he lifts Jungkook off the ground to gingerly rest him on his lap.

Jungkook's breathing is erratic when he presses himself closer to Taehyung. He muffles his cries on Taehyung’s shoulder, Taehyung's hands fastening around the waist to offer some more support. “T—Thank you."

Taehyung hums. Revna slithers up his arm to curl around it and peer at Jungkook. “The pain is in your head, alright?”

“Feels real. I don’t— I don’t get it.”

“We’ll talk about everything when we’re safe."

“‘kay.” Jungkook sniffles and sighs, and he only relaxes the tight clamp around his leg when Taehyung pries the constricted fingers away from it. “Sorry, I should… I should be walking, don’t wanna be a burden. I need, need something to eat, m'hungry.”

“You’re not a burden, everything's fine. I was about to cook some rabbit for us.”

“M’sorry.” Jungkook pushes himself off Taehyung but he sways on his spot.

Taehyung cups Jungkook’s nape to straighten him up. His repulsion for any human touch might be abated by the fatigue that hasn’t left him once since the escape, or perhaps it’s caused by something else that he isn’t too eager to unravel.

“You saved our lives,” Taehyung continues, his words more of a whisper only for Jungkook to hear. “You saved mine. Now I’m handling the rest, yeah? All you’ve got to do is sleep.”

Jungkook’s fingers curl around Taehyung’s wrist to bring the palm near his face, sighing when the fingers cup his cheek. Taehyung lets it happen, and to his own surprise, he draws a token of tenderness from this, one he allows himself to translate into a hug as he cradles Jungkook against him.

“You’re saving our lives too," Jungkook says and nuzzles Taehyung's neck.

“We’re close to the Seven Isles,” Taehyung chooses to say. “Everything’s almost over. We just need to hang in there for a little longer. Can you do that for me?”

Jungkook nods. “I’ll try to.”

“I think you can do better than that, don’t you?”

Jungkook huffs then emits a pained hiss. “I can.”

“That’s right. You can.”

“‘think m'gonna pass out again.”

“It’s fine, you're safe with me. Sleep.”

Jungkook does, relaxed in Taehyung’s arms.

There’s an ache in Taehyung’s chest right next to his heart, an intangible thread that Jungkook seems to pull on. It’s odd; elicited by someone other than his family or dragonborns. Taehyung isn't quite certain of what it is, but it compels him to embrace Jungkook a little tighter, to hold him a little closer, and only then does the ache alleviate.

Less than a day has passed since Jimin, Dahee and Seokjin have stumbled upon the destroyed manor, and they have yet to unearth any new information regarding Taehyung and Jungkook’s whereabouts.

“Yoongi and Jimin will be with me. We’ll scour this patch of the Emerald Vale next,” Dahee says, hunched over a map where she draws a circle with charcoal. “Seokjin and Hoseok will handle this square while Namjoon and Junhyun will hunt for more knowledge on ground. Once done, we will reconvene at the meeting spot you had agreed to meet after your departure from Eden.”

“Vanae’s people are not made aware of Taehyung’s disappearance yet,” Junhyun carries on. “We will keep it as such for another week if we do not find them before that.”

“Remember to use the raven you have with you."

“Let us depart.”

Taehyung is woken up by a roar, and fear sinks into his chest right as regret does.

“Revna! Gotta go!"

Revna rapidly slithers toward Taehyung and reverts into the ruby. He does not waste a second to grab Jungkook and dash between the trees, leaving their belongings behind.

He doesn't know whose dragon roar it has been. All that Taehyung recognizes is that it did not belong to any member of his family, and that sole fact is enough to make him run.

Taehyung races but his human legs aren't fast enough to broaden the distance between himself and the dragon.

A thunder, he realizes when he hears the sound of several pairs of wings snapping in the sky.

Taehyung glances upward. He catches just in time the sphere of wind and water a dragon breathes in his direction. He rolls down the side of a steep hill to avoid the attack.

The sphere blasts through trees.

A groan catches in his throat as pain explodes through him when the lacerations on his back and the protruding bones of his wings crash onto the ground and knock against a rock. He and Jungkook come to a halt at the bottom of the hill, Jungkook limp on top of Taehyung.

Taehyung feels some liquid slide down his chest.

Right where Jungkook's head is resting.

He glances down and immediately sees the blood trickling from Jungkook's head.

Taehyung curses.

The dragons have lost sight of him for now. He takes this ephemeral moment of peace to cup Jungkook's face. "Hey, Viper."

Jungkook isn't budging, his chest alarmingly still.

"Come on. Viper." Taehyung sits up to lay the Prince down. "Jungkook? Jungkook, please." He presses his ear above Jungkook's heart.

Nothing.

Taehyung can't hear anything amidst the blood roaring in his mind and the dragons' win—

Thump… Thump… Thump…

Taehyung exhales a shaky sigh.

He rushes to carry Jungkook and sprints again. He's not too far from the meeting point near the Seven Isles. Perhaps half an hour away.

A caw croaks on Taehyung's right.

His head darts toward the sound and he sees it then: a small ink raven, staring at him before it implodes into black drops. Another roar happens, and Taehyung recognizes this one.

Seungwon's dragon dives toward Taehyung and Jungkook.

Taehyung yanks at this draconic part of him, however nothing occurs, whether it being due to his wounds or the exhaustion.

He can't turn to dragon.

Taehyung resumes his race. He deftly zig-zags between trees, vaulting over a large root or fallen trunk, then he dashes down another hill.

Gnarled fingers cast a shadow above the trees Taehyung is approaching. He estimates the distance before they swipe. He ducks right as the claws cleave through the trunks.

He tumbles all while clutching Jungkook in his arms then springs right back up, adrenaline wildly pumping through his veins. Another dragon swipes at him, the acute claws slashing through the skin on his back and at the already existing gashes there.

Taehyung’s hold falters.

Jungkook falls from his grip.

“No!”

Taehyung rises on his knees seconds later, yet he's too late.

Jungkook is in Seungwon’s talon, his head dangling, more blood seeping from the temple.

Taehyung extends a hand, reaching out for him as Jungkook is being flown farther and farther away. Taehyung’s fingers become white, scales covering them as claws elongate from them. His entire arm changes to the one of his dragon counterpart and soon, the rest of his body does.

Taehyung pushes on his talons to pounce Seungwon.

His fangs sink into the flesh of Seungwon’s forelimb that loses its clamp around Jungkook. Taehyung snatches Jungkook before the latter can hit a boulder and does not waste a second to run off.

Taehyung spits the piece of flesh he has torn from Seungwon as a cone of fire passes over his head, burning the trees in front of him and forcing him to turn right. He falls head to head against Seungwon.

Seungwon charges at him, and so Taehyung charges back.

He can’t run away any longer.

Taehyung cradles Jungkook in his talon and against his chest as he swipes at Seungwon. Seungwon dodges and when he does, it creates a fleeting opening that Taehyung uses to strike Seungwon’s face with his tail, the spike carving through the thick skin. Seungwon growls and bites onto the limb to drag Taehyung closer.

The two wrestle for a bit, none of them using their breath. Not that Taehyung could, really, and Seungwon’s pride seems to be the reason why he resorts to only biting and clawing.

In spite of his wounds, Taehyung has the upper hand over Seungwon.

Taehyung's jaws close around Seungwon's shoulder. The bones crack and snap under the pressure. His claws anchor onto the soil and he swings his head to the side to hurl Seungwon through the trees. Lumps of soils fly beneath him when he sprints toward Seungwon, his jaw parts open, teeth about to rip at the dragon's throat once and for all, however before he gets the chance to do so, pain flares in his thigh and at a spot on his ribs.

Three more dragons have joined the fight. Then an additional seven, and a last group of three.

Taehyung claws at one, nips at another while trying to break himself free but he's too outnumbered as more dragons land.

Seungwon emits a snarl.

Everyone steps away from Taehyung.

Taehyung's throat rumbles with a growl and the staccato as he goes through his roulette. His fire breath dies in his mouth before he ever gets to breathe it out. He roars, shuffling left and right but the dragons surround him, snapping their teeth at him.

Then, a howler pierces between Taehyung's ears.

The realization is dizzying, and Taehyung staggers as he stares at the sky.

It's Jimin.

Jimin is here.

The fire and metal dragon immediately lunges at Seungwon, entirely discarding the other assailants. Dahee is there too, accompanied by a huge ink raven.

One of the smaller dragons on the ground is distracted by the sudden arrival. Taehyung rips their head from their body in one, messy bite that splatters blood on his scales. He feels something minuscule glide between his fingers: Revna drops to the ground, slithering across the dirt, completely unseen.

More grand ravens join the battle, shifting the balance along with Revna.

Revna bites on a dragon's scaled finger. The dragon doesn't even seem to notice the minuscule fangs until they crumble onto the ground with a pained cry. Dahee's lithe yet powerful form ravages through the opponent dragons, too fast for one, too agile for another, and too destructive for a third. Taehyung's mother shreds through their enemies, severing a talon before whirring from underneath the chest to bore her claws through an eye. Jimin is the same, however more crazed as he keeps Seungwon occupied, his focus zeroed-in on him.

During that time, Taehyung does his best to handle three dragons at once. He can tell that Revna is looking for an opportunity to aid and he gives her one by yanking down a dragon to slam them right next to where Revna is. She slithers to attempt to bite onto the dragon but Taehyung notices one of his opponents collecting lightning in their mouth and aiming it at Revna.

Taehyung charges at the dragon, earning himself a cleave to his back but he crashes onto the dragon, just in time to skew the cone of lightning that narrowly misses Revna.

More and more enemy dragons are being maimed or killed, enough for Seungwon to roar, a call that his thunder listens to.

The remainder of his dragons begin to fly off.

Seungwon is next, who hovers higher in the sky for a moment, his glare born onto Taehyung.

This time, Taehyung isn't the one to run away.

Jimin jumps to chase after Seungwon but Dahee grabs him by the tail and pulls him down, giving him a warning nip that Jimin lowers his head at.

A rustle erupts behind Taehyung.

His head darts around. He's still holding Jungkook against his chest as he scans the forest.

Perhaps the man with the scent or Yumi and her lizard are hiding in the bushes. Another sound elevates on the other side. He swivels around as he swings his talon at the dragon who swiftly avoids the hit.

Taehyung pauses when he recognizes his mother. He knows it's her, but his thoughts are a chaotic turmoil seconds away from blasting inward.

He and Jungkook can still be taken away again, and this urge to fight back and survive and protect boils hot in his veins because what if the dragons before him aren't his family? It can be the trick of a warlock, as Taehyung has seen it happen so many times under the man with the scent's clutch.

The woman posing as Taehyung's mother shifts to her human counterpart. "Taehyung, my son," she starts, her palms hovering in the air. "You carved a miniature version of you, Jimin, Junhyun and I in our dragon selves when you were eleven years old as my anniversary gift. Junhyun is carrying us on his back in it. It's me, my son. *Please*, believe me."

Something plummets within Taehyung's chest.

He turns to human, holding Jungkook in his arms as he falls on his knees in front of his mother.

She rushes toward him, Jimin and Yoongi on her trail.

"His head," Taehyung rasps and looks down at the blood that has oozed from the wound on Jungkook's temple. "He hit his head. I don't know how bad…"

Trees' leaves are the first thing Taehyung sees when he wakes up.

Heat blooms from his right. A weight is on him, heavy and suffocating. He sits up straight, throwing the thing away from him.

"Taehyung! Taehyung you're with us," Jimin says — *or is it really him?* —, rushing toward Taehyung and stepping on the blanket that had been draped over Taehyung.

Taehyung doesn't need to ask for proof that the one facing is truly his best friend because Jimin promptly shares about how Taehyung had housed a pet horned-turtle, a secret only Jimin had been privy to.

Disorientated, Taehyung looks around as his brain struggles to form any coherent thoughts. He sees his mother and Yoongi, along with Seokjin and Hoseok, all settled around a bonfire.

Dahee crouches next to him. "Let's give him some space," she says to Jimin who steps away. "We are on our way to Vanae, my son. We will first collect your father and Namjoon, after what—"

"Jungkook," Taehyung interrupts.

Is he with them? Has Seungwon or the man with the scent taken him away?

What if he died from the wound on his head?

Dahee's gentle smile falters. She moves aside.

Jungkook is laid down on a sleeping bag, muffling his pants and pained whimpers in the crook of his arm. "Something is wrong with Jungkook. Yoongi has not been able to identify what, exactly. We will refer to the Elders and—"

Taehyung stands, perhaps too fast because the world tilts around him. He plants a foot down to catch himself, his mother helping steady him too. His back hurts, however nowhere near the agony it had been before, and he only notices now the bandages fastened around his upper chest and shoulders.

Taehyung doesn't mean to shrug off his mother and Jimin if it's truly them, but he walks past them without a glance as he makes his way toward Jungkook.

He lowers by Jungkook's side and a conflicting storm of emotions rises in him. He's confused and calm, while also being wary and relieved, unsure on if all that has gone down since the first shackle that had fallen has been real or not.

Jungkook meets Taehyung's gaze. His face that had been etched around a teary frown relaxes every so slightly. "Taehyung…?"

"Yeah… S'me."

An aborted sob tumbles out of Jungkook's mouth. "Tae, please."

"Are you in pain again?" Taehyung's words are raspy and slurred, but Jungkook understands.

Jungkook nods. He reaches a hand toward Taehyung that the latter takes without question.

Taehyung sits down against a tree log. He says nothing when Jungkook shuffles to settle sideways between his legs, aided by Taehyung's careful hands. Taehyung cradles Jungkook in his arms, the only source of comfort he is certain of right now, and Jungkook echoes the sentiment when he nestles his face in the dip of Taehyung', breathing out a relieved sigh.

Their wedding rings click together when Jungkook's left hand finds its way above Taehyung's on his hip. Their fingers entangle together, neither of them letting go.

Taehyung slumps against the log, uncaring of the people watching him. They vanish from his mind moments later anyway, his dimming attention narrowed to the grim floral scent, to the warm weight against him as he falls asleep.

“Have you found them?”

Seungwon pauses at the entrance of the castle, staring back at Dohyun.

Dohyun lifts his cup of mint tea infused with healing properties to ease the pain of his amputated arm. None of the warlocks he had contacted had been able to save it, an unfortunate consequence of his curiosity.

Not that it matters. Nothing does beside his dove.

“We were ambushed.” Seungwon looks exceedingly miserable, a surprising feat for the already pathetic dragonborn.

“Ambushed.”

“By Taehyung’s mother, a warlock and Jimin."

“You had a team of fifteen with you,” Dohyun slowly enunciates. Perhaps this way Seungwon will comprehend better how he has terribly failed him.

“We—”

“Jimin, you say?” Dohyun leaves his cup on the table. He braces himself on the table before staggering toward Seungwon. “Is this why you haven’t brought my dove back? Because of a long, forgotten bond?”

“No,” Seungwon sneers. His gaze darts down before snapping on Dohyun again.

Dohyun would usually smile, always amused by other people’s trepidation, however his levity has left him along with his dove. “Then why. Is my dove. *Not* here?”

“We were overpowered. Wounded because your damn warlocks—”

Dohyun swiftly retrieves his dagger to plunge it in Seungwon’s left eye.

He winces at the yell that tears out of Seungwon’s throat and he kicks him in the shin, the dragonborn falling on his knees.

“My warlocks, as you say, will be the only reason why you’ll survive this, Seungwon. I can pardon your hesitation to fight against Jimin.” Dohyun yanks the knife out and wipes the blood on Seungwon’s shirt. “Love can be a weakening sentiment, as much as it can be an empowering one. However, my dove… My…” He pauses, overcome with emotions and he does not try to repress his tears that slide down his cheeks. “God... My precious dove.” The dagger slips from his grasp and clatters on the floor.

His dove must be so terrified so far away from him. *So lost,* Dohyun worries and makes his way toward the kitchen table. Taehyung had been impossibly confused when back in Dohyun's care. He had seemed scared, even, a result of the indoctrination he must have had to endure at the hand of those he calls his 'family'.

Dohyun hopes his dove does not resent him for the punishment that Dohyun had to deliver yet didn't want to. It *had* to happen, both for discipline and to ease Taehyung back into their routine. Dohyun won't punish his dove again when he'll have him back. Taehyung had not really understood the need for the reprimand no matter how warranted it had been. Dohyun could try a new method instead. Taehyung has always responded better to positive reinforcement, after all.

Dohyun slumps on his chair when he reaches it, staring up at the ceiling.

His lids fall shut.

He already misses Taehyung. His wonderful, breathtaking dove. He has missed bonding with him, and it's no wonder Taehyung had been so anxious and disoriented after their bond had been severed by this infuriating Elder Miseon six years ago.

It has taken years to perfect the shushing spell and ensure Taehyung's safety, so that the only matter he ever has to worry about is allowing his healing breath to do the work while Dohyun takes care of everything else.

Dohyun's dove had finally flown back to their nest, and now he's gone again.

He won't be able to handle the separation between himself and his dove for years again.

It isn't very healthy, Dohyun muses. He would go as far as saying that he's nurturing some sort of dependency with Taehyung, where being so far away from his dove renders him angry, lonely, and apathetic to anything that is not related to Taehyung. What hurts Dohyun the most is that Taehyung is experiencing the same pain. His dove has never shied away from reciprocating Dohyun's feelings.

Dohyun has always yearned to bond with someone but had never found anyone worthy of his love and care.

No one until he had first seen his dove.

He needs to mend his and Taehyung's broken bond. He has to remind his dove of how much he cherishes him, that he is here to tend to Taehyung and give him anything and everything he wants, as he had six years ago.

Dohyun exhales through his mouth. He props an elbow on the table, staring at Seungwon.

The damn reptile is not even worth becoming one of Dohyun's birds.

"So... What's the plan?" Yumi asks.

"Bringing my dove back home is my priority, as it should be yours," Dohyun says to the few men he has left. He will have to hire more as soon as possible. "The main crutches are his acquaintances. They will try to keep Taehyung away from me."

"What about Jungkook? He's dangerous."

“I want him too.” For the first time since his dove has been snatched from his nest, a small smile curves Dohyun's mouth. “I’ll have to see first if he will become a hindrance between my dove and I.”

“Hyuna had not lied,” Yumi says, but she does not sound very surprised. “Jungkook is a necromancer.”

“I assumed he would try to find a way to escape with my dove, however I had not anticipated for him to succeed by manifesting such a powerful arcane.”

“Well, you did choose to push him over the edge by ripping Taehyung’s wings.”

“*Removing* my dove’s wings was a way to revive the bond between us. While I *did* wish to watch Jungkook snap and confirm to us the presence of his necromancy, I didn't expect him to raise the dead. Neither had you, even if you always know more than you let on. However it had been a fascinating sight, enough to distract me from my dove for a split second.”

“And for you to lose an arm," Yumi snorts.

“I’m not in the mood for quips, Yumi.”

“I’ll behave until your dove is back.”

Dohyun nods then sighs once more. “I dearly miss him.”

“Perhaps playing with Jungkook has been a mistake.”

“Perhaps, but it is a delightful one, even if it is regrettable now.”

“I assume the first step is getting rid of Taehyung’s family?”

Dohyun’s nose wrinkle around a snarl. “ *I* am his family. And yes. We must. Seungwon,” he calls, and the dragonborn’s eyes — or rather eye — settles on him. “This primordial stone you spoke of, what do you know about it?”

“N—Not much,” Seungwon answers, a warlock healing the gash tearing his face.

“Amaris’ rulers haven’t told you anything?”

“I help them search for information about the stone, but we haven’t found much.”

“What about this pit of dragons’ bones you found? Anything particular about it?”

“We still don’t know where they’re from,” Yumi says. “My familiar had initially dug this pit while hunting for food because it told me it could smell something enticing underground.”

How curious.

Dohyun peers at the large familiar that loves to feast on corpses. “There was no arcane in it? None at all?”

“None that I could find. It'd be a regular dragonborn graveyard if it was not for the strange silver lines on the skeletons, along with the foul scent that had attracted my familiar. There is more than

meets the eye nonetheless.”

“What knowledge do you have about this primordial stone?” Dohyun had been too impatient to be with Taehyung again to inquire about this matter. “Amaris’ rulers told you it is related to dragonborns in some ways.”

“I only know one thing about the primordial stone,” Seungwon says.

“Which is?”

“It can kill dragonborns.”

“The Elders said he should be awake by now.”

“He will be soon. He simply needs to rest and restore his arcane.”

“It’s scary that something can deplete our arcane like that. I don’t remember hearing about runes like those during the Great War.”

“Arcane is an ever growing thing. However we will find a solution against those runes and this Yumi warlock.”

“Jungkook still hasn’t said *anything*.”

“I believe he is waiting for his husband to awaken. Jungkook is attentive. He wouldn’t want to share a matter Taehyung wouldn’t be comfortable being told.”

“Yeah... Sounds like him.”

“I also think it might simply be… too much.”

“Like what happened to Taehyung the first time?”

“Exactly. Some matters are too painful to be spoken out loud."

Taehyung’s lids flutter open at the sound of his father’s and Jimin’s voice. Everything is a blur of brown and light beige in front of him.

The ceiling of a house, Taehyung realizes.

He moves to stand but he can only raise on an elbow, his muscles sore and weak.

“Taehyung!”

A chair rattles on the ground, trailed by quick footsteps.

“By the Elders… Taehyung!”

The shape that rushes toward Taehyung wraps around him as he sits up. He recognizes Jimin's hair, his scent too of metallic honey, but his mind scrambles to believe where he is.

Jimin releases his hold to step back. "You're home, and it's really me. Remember that time where you fell down and ended up in a bush of thorns that took us hours to remove?"

Taehyung's eyes widen. He grabs onto the sleeves of Jimin's shirt to yank his friend in his arms, Jimin promptly hugging him back.

"I'm so fucking relieved," Jimin rasps, his shoulders shaking.

The door bursts open.

Taehyung startles and breaks away from Jimin to stare at the door where his mother is standing. She marches inside the bedroom. Taehyung doesn't need to ask before she brings him into her warm arms. Taehyung clutches at the back of her vest. He doesn't want to break down, something preventing him from letting go no matter how much his throat clogs up.

"My son." Dahee cards a hand through Taehyung's hair. "My strong, strong boy." She leans back to cup Taehyung's face and presses a kiss on his forehead before hugging once more, her tears silent. "Everyone has been waiting for you to awaken for the past two weeks."

Taehyung sees Minsoo standing at the entrance. His grandfather's prosthetic leg clicks across the wooden floor as he walks toward Taehyung. Dahee yelps when Minsoo grabs her with one hand and easily lifts her by the collar of her shirt.

"Father!"

Minsoo has a newspaper in his hands that he rolls up to smack Taehyung's head with once, twice. Taehyung blinks at the third.

"You stupid fucking kid."

The lump in Taehyung's throat swells when he notices the mist in his grandfather's eye. He has only seen Minsoo cry once, during the first rescue. Taehyung folds his arms around Minsoo's chest, feeling like a child again when his grandfather's own arms roughly squeeze him.

"We found you again, kiddo."

Taehyung nods, unable to speak.

Minsoo pats Taehyung's back, no sliver of pain erupting when he does.

Taehyung freezes.

"I took care of your wounds," Minsoo answers.

"What about the Prince?" Taehyung wonders as Minsoo relaxes his clamp.

Minsoo huffs. "An Elder helped him."

"Because you refused to heal Jungkook," Dahee interjects, and Taehyung has an inkling that this argument has been occurring for quite some time now.

“The last thing I’ll ever do is heal a human, as I told you,” Minsoo snips. “The same ones that have mutilated my grandson.”

“This human *saved* your grandson’s life."

“You don’t know. He hasn’t spoken a word.”

“He did. Save my life,” Taehyung clarifies. Dahee and Minsoo’s gazes drift on him. “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here.”

Minsoo mutely peers at Taehyung before saying “Doesn’t matter. The Prince is all good, ain’t he?”

“*Kim Minsoo.*”

Taehyung watches with amusement the way Minsoo’s composure falters at the edge of draconian that coats his daughter's timber.

“Terror of a woman,” Minsoo mutters and strides out of the room, not without throwing the newspaper that lands on Taehyung’s head. “Stupid kid."

Taehyung does not miss the hand Minsoo raises to wipe his eye.

“And stupid old man,” Dahee fires back at her father. She ducks to dodge the ball of vines Minsoo aims at her. “Idiot,” she huffs through pursed lips then turns toward Taehyung again. “Are you alright, my son?”

“Yeah, I’m just… drowsy. And confused. I don’t even know if all of this is real.” Taehyung basks in the happiness and lack of fear either way. Pain shoots in his arm when Jimin painfully tweaks at the skin, a bruise already forming there. Taehyung jerks his arm away to glare at the fiend.

“This is real, you stupid idiot,” Jimin hisses. “Those are real,” he adds and points at the very *real tears* in his eyes.

“Where’s—” Taehyung is interrupted by another series of footsteps as more people enter his former bedroom at his parents’ house.

Yoongi, Namjoon and Hoseok remain at the back of the room while Seokjin pauses in front of them.

A silence stretches, uncomfortably winded, and so Taehyung says “We gonna hug or what?”

“Always!” Seokjin is the first one to race forward.

Taehyung reciprocates the hug with a light chuckle before releasing Seokjin. His eyes meet Hoseok’s and he beckons the man forward who refuses to budge until Seokjin drags him closer to Taehyung by the ear.

Hoseok averts his gaze.

Taehyung clicks his tongue. He throws the covers off himself to climb down the bed and bring the imbecile in his arms. Taehyung reckons that everyone in the room has seen the state of his wings if the way Hoseok dutifully avoids touching the shoulder blades is any hint.

“I’m sor—”

“Don’t,” Taehyung cuts off. “It’s not your fault. Don’t."

“But—”

“It’s not.”

“I should’ve been more careful. Everyone trusted me to lead us down there safely and I fucked up before we even stepped a single foot there and—”

"And fucking nothing." Taehyung reclines to peer at Hoseok's contorted face. "It wasn’t your fault. What’s done is done. Now we’ll be more careful, and we know what to expect.”

Hoseok is the one to initiate the hug this time. “I’m sorry about…”

“It’s fine, I’ve had worse,” Taehyung opts to say with a small smile.

Seokjin smacks the back of Hoseok’s head. “See? I told you he wouldn’t want to burn your head off.”

“What?”

“You know how Hoseok can spiral sometimes,” Seokjin laments.

Hoseok scowls. “My concerns were valid."

“You were worried that Taehyung might use your bones as toothpicks. There’s nothing valid or sane about this.”

Laughter elevates in the room and Taehyung huffs. He surveys Namjoon who’s smiling at him, then his eyes settle on the warlock. Yoongi arches a brow, arms crossed over his chest, and so Taehyung does the same because he’s childish like that.

“Not again,” Jimin grunts.

“Come on,” Dahee says, pushing on Junhyun's shoulders to guide him in Taehyung’s direction.

Junhyun looks like… a mess, to put it kindly. His face is blotchy, red and swollen from crying, and more tears are streaming down his face. He blows his nose into a tissue that he throws behind his shoulder before engulfing Taehyung. Taehyung does the same, sighing on his father’s chest.

“My son,” Junhyun says with a waver.

“I’m alright."

“Darling,” Dahee says. The sound of Junhyun blowing his nose once more elevates above Taehyung along with some laughter from those crowding the place. “Your father has been a mess."

Taehyung’s chuckle quickly stifles in his throat, and he rapidly blinks to chase away the prickling in his eyes. Junhyun rubs a palm up and down Taehyung’s back, as he used to after Taehyung had been taken away for the first time.

Junhyun detaches himself from Taehyung to take the other tissue Dahee hands him while she presses another on Junhyun's eyes to dab his tears.

Taehyung nearly breaks down then, but he's still held back. He makes a move to sit down when he notices some movements in the corner of his eyes.

Jungkook is standing in the doorway, his mouth part open.

A myriad of feelings surges within Taehyung: gratitude, concern and a lingering sense of dread. However the most potent and unexpected one is the relief that swathes him at seeing Jungkook well and alive.

Memories of all that has happened flash in Taehyung's mind.

The cells and shackles.

The rat bones, the guards, the fight.

The blood, the terror — *so much pain* — and finally, the hope.

"Hey, Vip—" Taehyung grunts and staggers backward when Jungkook collides against him, the latter's hands fastening on Taehyung's back. Taehyung's arms are limp by his sides, unsure on what to do next.

It becomes a tad awkward as the silence grows, especially when he notices the gazes riveted on him and Jungkook.

"Kim Taehyung. Hug him," Dahee orders.

Taehyung does not pout. He's not the pouting kind of guy, but his lips *do* purse.

"Fucking hug your husband, you stupid idiot."

"I mean… He's letting it happen. I guess that's progress?" Namjoon interjects.

Seokjin nudges Hoseok with an elbow and says "You'd think Taehyung has gone to the same school of emotional constipation you enrolled at."

"I'm perfectly in tune with my emotions. And I'm not constipated. I'm guarded," Hoseok corrects.

"Whatever makes you sleep at night."

"Kim Taehyung!" Dahee and Jimin both shout.

"Hug me back, you prick," Jungkook mumbles. "I'm not letting go until you do." He pauses. "Unless you're bothered by it. Just— Can you hug me back? For a second? Please."

Taehyung's lips press into a line when an uncomfortable tug twists in his chest. His arms curl around Jungkook, and Jungkook responds by burying his head on Taehyung's shoulder. It's strangely okay, even without the looming possibility of being kidnapped again or worse. In retrospect, it's not *too* bad to hold Jungkook. A human. Or at least *this* human, even if the Prince is more than that.

To Taehyung's heated horror, the bystanders still in the bedroom all begin to clap, Hoseok and Jimin whistling.

Taehyung's face warms up. "Get out."

Taehyung's parents and friends, along with Jungkook's, all vacate the room, Hoseok doing so after blowing a kiss in Taehyung's direction.

The door closes.

Taehyung and Jungkook are left alone.

Taehyung counts up to sixty before saying "Come on, let go of me." Jungkook, as expected, tightens his grip around Taehyung. "Viper."

Jungkook suddenly jerks away from Taehyung. "Oh my God. I'm sorry. I touched your back. I'm really sorry."

"It's fine," Taehyung yawns. He slides under the blankets of his bed to recline on the pillows propped against the headboard. He makes a vague motion in front of him. "You can sit if you want."

And so Jungkook does.

Except that Jungkook climbs up on the mattress, then on *Taehyung's lap* that he straddles. He scoots forward and presses his chest flush against Taehyung's. His hands grip at the pillow, avoiding Taehyung's back.

One of Taehyung's eyes twitches.

"This is *nowhere* near what I said. I meant on the damn bed, not me."

"Please… Shut up."

The lack of levity in the response prompts Taehyung to glance down.

There's a faint tremble in Jungkook's body. Some drops wet Taehyung's shirt where Jungkook's head is nestled.

Taehyung slumps against the pillows, his head lolled atop the headboard. He says naught when Jungkook shuffles closer if possible, his weight warm above Taehyung.

"I was so scared, Taehyung," Jungkook whispers, his voice strained. "I didn't know what to do."

"You still found a way out."

"Mhm, I tried."

"You didn't just try. It worked. You made it happen. We wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for you," Taehyung says, to which Jungkook nods. Taehyung doesn't know what else to say, let alone what to do with his hands, and so he opts to awkwardly pat Jungkook's back.

"Do you really not know how to hug someone..."

“I know how to hug my family and friends, and we aren’t any of that." The admission leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

“S’right, we’re husbands. That’s a new category you have to add.” Jungkook falls silent for a moment before speaking again, intersected by a sniffle. “Didn’t think our wedding would be followed by…”

Taehyung's hands are slow when they cup Jungkook’s cheeks to lift his head. Jungkook looks like a sniveling mess and Taehyung says so, earning himself a weak punch on the chest. He releases his hold when the contact becomes too much.

“I’m not sniveling,” Jungkook mumbles and he sprawls his hands on Taehyung’s navel, sitting up straighter.

“That’s definitely snot on my shirt.” Taehyung leans to the side to snatch a tissue from a box that he uses to wipe Jungkook’s nose. “You’re a terrible crier,” he mutters without any real bite. He throws the crumpled tissue on the nightstand then he peers at Jungkook who’s already staring back at him. “What?”

“Can you…”

“Are you still in pain?”

Jungkook shakes his head but does not speak. Instead, he grabs a hold of Taehyung’s wrists. He brings them higher, Taehyung’s hands balling up but Jungkook presses them against his face, expectantly surveying Taehyung with a cautious, yet candid yearning.

Taehyung hesitates, but he loosens his fingers when Jungkook’s brush over his knuckles. Then, with ever so slow motions, he cradles Jungkook’s face, his thumbs resting on the apple of the damp cheeks.

Jungkook sighs and intertwines his fingers between Taehyung's. His shoulders slump, as though a weight has been lifted from him. He nuzzles Taehyung’s left palm, tears clinging onto his lashes. Taehyung allows this touch too, and he still does when Jungkook’s lips graze against the heart of Taehyung’s palm.

Taehyung expects himself to be repulsed, for the touch to remind him of the man with the scent, of humiliation, betrayal or mutilation. He expects himself to flinch and anticipate pain next, but his body does not brace. If anything, he relaxes more the longer he and Jungkook remain like this.

It’s simply… nice.

It feels nice.

Taehyung thinks about Jongsuk and how, up till now, he had never noticed the dissimilarities between Jungkook and Jongsuk, like in the way they treat Taehyung: one with honesty, the other with deception; or in what they have shown of themselves to Taehyung: one vulnerability, the other a façade.

“You know,” Jungkook starts, tearing Taehyung out of his musing. “When I saw you in the chair, and when Dohyun forced me to… To clean you. I was so, so scared because— Because *you* looked so scared and defeated and it was so frightening, Taehyung, 'cause you’re never like that, but you

were so—” Jungkook stops, his gaze cast low. “I would’ve given up too in your place, after what Dohyun has done to you.”

Taehyung still isn’t sure why he had allowed Jungkook to get a glimpse into his memories, and no matter how much he wants to regret it, Taehyung can’t.

“But you're still so strong,” Jungkook continues.

Taehyung had not felt as such.

If anything, someone else has been strong for him when he couldn’t bring himself to be.

“Sorry. I don’t know what I’m saying, I'm just… I’m really relieved. God... I can’t stop crying, m’sorry. Everything’s been a lot and then you slept for two weeks which was scary, and I was missing you but I— Taehyung?”

It's only when his name is spoken that Taehyung realizes he’s crying too, the tears warm on his cheeks. The tight reign he has over himself begins to crackle. He opens his mouth to talk but all that comes out is a choked sob that he tries to swallow down.

"It's okay," Jungkook whispers. “We're okay.”

Taehyung nods, he can't speak, and the pang near his heart is pulled on.

He blames it on the exhaustion weighing him when he frees his hands from Jungkook’s hold, sliding his palms along Jungkook’s waist and tucking him close. He grips onto the back of Jungkook's shirt and muffles his quiet cries against Jungkook's crown.

Then, Taehyung utters those words he hasn’t spoken to a human since the nightmare.

“Thank you.”

Taehyung rasps them a second time because once does not feel enough and he wants to do so a third time but his throat is too stifled; the ache for the Prince too staggering.

Jungkook tentatively hugs Taehyung back. “Thank you too.”

They stay like that for a while, engulfed with one another, drawing from each other a comfort no other person would be able to grant them.

Taehyung exhales after a lull. He grabs a tissue to give it to Jungkook. “Stop sniveling on my shirt,” he mutters, voice gravelly, but then proceeds to fasten his arms around Jungkook again when Jungkook makes a motion to move away.

“You’re sniveling on my hair, that’s worse."

There are a couple bumps there and Taehyung wonders if they may be the sign of something more grievous happening underneath, like an internal bleeding.

A shot of concern sinks within Taehyung. His hand flies up, then, with gentle fingers, he probes at the back of Jungkook’s scalp.

“They’re healed.”

Taehyung halts.

He clears his throat and lets his palm fall on Jungkook’s nape.

Jungkook slackens even more, heavy atop Taehyung. He nuzzles the dip of Taehyung’s throat, his lashes tickling the skin, then his breath next when his lips brush there. “This is nice.”

Taehyung doesn’t know what to reply to this, nor how to feel about it, so he releases Jungkook to cup his face again, his thumb resting above Jungkook’s closed eyes to stop him from looking.

Akin to within the cell, a tentative comfort seeps through Taehyung when he presses his and Jungkook's foreheads together. Back then, the tenderness of the fleeting touch had been enough to endure more days of punishment, and now, when Taehyung's trembling lips close to rest against Jungkook's forehead in a feather-light touch, it softens the ache to a tamed, *content* itch.

Taehyung leans back a few seconds later. He conceals Jungkook’s eyes with a hand while his other curls around Jungkook’s thigh, then with deft but tired motions, he moves Jungkook on the mattress, the two of them laying on their side and facing each other.

“We can talk about the rest later," Taehyung says, still veiling Jungkook's eyes. "I’m tired."

“Yeah, sounds good.” Jungkook’s fingers find their way around Taehyung’s wrist again. “Can I stay here?”

Taehyung hesitates. He doesn't mind Jungkook staying, but he also doesn't want to show his back nor sleep on it. He eventually settles on turning Jungkook so that the latter faces away.

“Thank you.”

Taehyung makes a noncommittal noise and wipes his eyes, the fatigue greater than before. He glances at Jungkook and notices the tremors in his form. “Are you still crying?”

“No, I’m cold…”

“Then get under the blankets, dumbass.”

“I’m pouting.”

“It’s not my fault.”

“Yes, well, how am I supposed to get under the blankets if I can’t turn around because the big bad Kim Taehyung can’t bear the thought of being seen shedding a tear?”

“Fuck off."

“Crying is a thing every human being has done in their life. There’s nothing embarrassing about it, prick.”

“If all you’re gonna do is complain and disturb my sleep, get out of my bed.”

Jungkook does, to Taehyung’s surprise who wonders if he has gone too far.

Jungkook climbs down the mattress to rise on his feet and, unlike Taehyung is expecting, Jungkook tugs the blankets to cozy up under them. He pulls them up to his face, only his red and puffy eyes visible to Taehyung.

“Thank you for taking care of me."

Taehyung frowns. “What are you talking about?”

Jungkook's voice is quietened by an unusual coyness when he answers. “After we got out, in the forest."

Oh.

“I wasn’t taking care of you.”

“You made sure to feed and hydrate me. You kept me warm and safe. You helped me with the pain, and never stopped carrying me. You took care of me.”

But I wouldn't do that for a human.

“That was the normal thing to do,” Taehyung settles on answering.

“Maybe.”

“And you found us an escape.” Taehyung does not admit that, even if Jungkook had not saved their lives, he wouldn’t have left him behind.

“I saved yours and you saved mine. We’re equal now.”

Taehyung retraces all that has happened since he met Jungkook.

Like the way Jungkook had tugged Taehyung out of the crowd at Amaris, or how he had granted Taehyung the first token of trust through Revna, then his arcane. Taehyung’s heart clenches when he remembers about Kija and the closure Jungkook had helped them find. There was the wedding too, where Jungkook had shunned the man with the scent and forgave Taehyung’s inaction, when Taehyung had not deserved a sliver of Jungkook’s kindness and patience.

Then, there is the fight at the manor: Jungkook igniting Taehyung’s hope. Jungkook removing the shackles. Jungkook killing to protect them.

Taehyung abhors humans, but he supposes that some — *one* — could be the only exception.

“Yeah, we are,” Taehyung belatedly answers, words barely above a murmur.

Jungkook’s eyes are crinkled at the corners, honest and full of a happiness so potent that Taehyung can feel it mingle with his own contentment. “Do you want to go back to the house or stay with your parents for a bit?”

“I want to stay here for some time,” Taehyung answers, taken aback that Jungkook would even consider this.

Jungkook yawns. “Is it okay if I stay too?”

“It’s not me you should ask.”

“It’s in your bed that I’m in."

“You can stay here in the *house*, not in my bed. Stop misunderstanding me.”

Jungkook barks out a laugh, obnoxiously loud. “That’s very rich coming from the master of *‘I will always be suspicious of every single being on Aurora’* ,” Jungkook says in his, as always, terrible imitation of Taehyung. “Can I or not? For both.”

“No for my bed. There are guest rooms.”

A silence floats in the room.

“I’m pouting,” Jungkook *and* Taehyung both say in unison, Taehyung in a more caricatural way.

“I don’t sound like that!"

“You sure do right now."

“I hate you so much.”

“That must be why you’re scooting closer.”

Jungkook freezes on the bed. “Sorry.” He trails off for a moment before saying “You didn’t tell me not to, though?”

Taehyung hasn’t.

As Jungkook tends to when it comes to understanding Taehyung, he catches onto the underlying permission. He shuffles closer, soon tucking himself against Taehyung’s right side. He hugs Taehyung’s arm between his own, his face buried against it.

Taehyung wants to make a quip about the proximity, a jab that'd be more playful than scornful, however when he glances down and notices the distant look in Jungkook's gaze, Taehyung says nothing.

“We never got to go to one of your favorite spots high up."

“You speak like we died. We’re still alive. We’ve got plenty of time to go anywhere.”

“That means you’ll take me to one?”

Taehyung picks at the nail of his thumb as he stares at the ceiling. “Yeah.”

Jungkook emits a pleased chuckle that warmly puffs on Taehyung’s arm. “This is the first date we’ll go on together. And as husbands.”

Taehyung can’t repress his derisive scoff this time. “This is not a fucking date.”

Jungkook's head lifts to peer up at Taehyung. “But we’ll be going together. Just you and me.”

“That doesn’t make this a date? I've gone out with Woobin only before and it most certainly was not a date. I don’t date.”

“I sure hope not,” Jungkook challenges. “You’re married now. You’re supposed to date your husband. *Me.* ”

“I’m not dating you. I’m single.”

“You’re still taking me on a date. I said so.”

“I'm retracting that offer.”

"No you're not."

"Yes I am."

Taehyung wouldn’t be able to express it properly if asked, but Jungkook being the energetic, hellish *brat* that he is, ebbs the upset that flares within Taehyung when memories of a lifeless Prince flicker in his mind.

“No..." Jungkook rests his head on Taehyung’s shoulder, and new tears seep through Taehyung's shirt. “I’m really happy we’re back and safe. I missed this… I’ve been sleeping in the same bed as Yoongi and Joon, but would it be okay if I stay in yours for a few days? Like at the citadel?”

“Yes, but…” Taehyung doesn’t know how to phrase what he wants to say. The frustration grows.

“If you change your mind at some point, I won’t take it to heart, don’t worry."

Taehyung's clenched fingers loosen up. “Yes, that’s what I—" He exhales. "Yeah.”

“I know. I understood you.”

A lump swells in Taehyung's throat. His lids flutter, chasing away the sting in his eyes. “Now sleep, I’m tired.”

“Goodnight, Tae.”

"What the *fuck* did you call me?”

“There's nothing that warrants such offense.”

“‘Tae’ is offending and before you roll your eyes at me,” Taehyung warns but Jungkook does anyway, “Don’t—”

“I like ‘Tae’.”

“I don’t.”

“Do you really not?”

“Yes.”

Jungkook hums as he hoists himself up on an arm to peer down at Taehyung. “That’s too bad, Tae.” Then he makes himself comfortable on Taehyung’s chest again with some squiggle and a happy sigh.

“You fucking brat, you—”

The door swings open.

Taehyung’s gaze darts on Jimin.

“Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt, but Revna wanted to be with you both,” Jimin explains as he enters the room.

Several other heads peek out from the doorway, mainly Seokjin, Namjoon and Hoseok who wiggles his brows at Taehyung with a suggestive smile. Seokjin on the other hand disappears for a second before reappearing with an ink heart that he blows toward the bed. Taehyung throws a fireball at it.

Jimin deposits the basilisk on the bed and once done, he leaves a noisy kiss on Jungkook’s forehead. “Goodnight lovebird,” Jimin says and Jungkook chuckles.

Jimin makes a move to peck Taehyung’s forehead but Taehyung sprawls his hand on his friend’s face to push him away. “Fuck off.”

“Let me—”

Taehyung and Jimin wrestle for a bit but Taehyung is still too tired and so Jimin comes out victorious with a wet, resounding kiss. “Goodnight, second lovebird.”

“Die.”

Jimin saunters off to the exit door, however before he leaves, he twirls around and says “If you intend to do what I would do, use protection.”

Hoseok frowns. “I thought Taehyung was a virgin?”

Taehyung gawks at him.

Namjoon’s head peeps inside the room again. “Jungkook is a virgin too because he had to preserve himself for—”

"Namjoon!" Jungkook springs up, the back of his neck beet red. “Leave!”

“Well… Enjoy yourself either way," Jimin exclaims and vacates the place with the others.

The door slams shut.

Taehyung throws his free arm over his face, his other one commandeered by Jungkook again as the latter wiggles under the blanket while grumbling about treacherous friends.

A stillness fills the room.

“Sooo…”

“Don’t.”

Jungkook downright giggles. “Have you really never had sex or were they just teasing? If you’re comfortable talking about that.”

“I’ve never been interested in sex with anyone.”

“Oh. I see. Me too? I think? I’m not sure, actually. But so far no one has interested me like that."

“It’s not something you have to figure out if you don’t want to. Sex is whatever and I’d rather sleep."

“Cuddling is much better.”

“Both aren’t mutually exclusive."

Jungkook’s playful gaze settles on Taehyung as he covers his mouth with a hand, doing nothing to conceal his smile. “My… Are you proposing what I think you’re proposing, husband of mine?”

Taehyung stares, because this is all he can do. “No?! Get off of me.” He grabs Jungkook by the collar of the shirt but the Prince tightens his hold around Taehyung’s chest while slinging a leg between Taehyung’s. “Get. Off.”

“No.”

“Then shut up, I’m trying to sleep.”

“Yes, yes, sleeping.”

“And you don’t have to be all over me.”

“M’sleeping, can't hear you.” Jungkook punctuates this with a soft snoring sound.

Taehyung zaps Jungkook who jolts and smacks a hand on Taehyung’s chest.

Taehyung can zap the Prince again.

His arcane is back and still here and *by the Elders,* Taehyung is so goddamn happy to be safe and sound, surrounded by his family.

“There’s too much light,” Jungkook blurts out and leaves the bed to slide the curtains close. When he crawls back on the mattress, he folds his legs under him and sits on the cushion his feet provide. He silently surveys Taehyung, fiddling with his fingers.

“What?”

“Are you hungry or thirsty?” Jungkook inquires. His hair is messy, sticking in different directions, echoed by the faint dark circles under his eyes.

“I’m a little thirsty, not really hungry."

“I’ll be right back.”

Saying that Taehyung is puzzled as he watches Jungkook exit the bedroom would be an understatement. He sits up against the headboard nonetheless.

Something moves at the end of the bed underneath the comforters. Taehyung picks at the cuticle of his thumb, hesitation flaring in him. He lifts the blanket a few seconds later and meets the snake's red eyes. "Thank you."

Revna slithers toward him. She bums her snout against his wrist then flicks her tongue in a kiss before making her way back to where she had been.

Moments later, Jungkook enters the room with a glass and bottle of water, pushing the door close with his foot.

Jungkook installs himself on the bed. He pours the water in the glass that he wordlessly gives to Taehyung.

Taehyung had not realized how thirsty he had been up til now and he gulps down the water in one go. He doesn't need to pour himself another serving, Jungkook is already tilting the bottle to do so for him.

Taehyung scrutinizes Jungkook. He questions for a moment if there's some sort of ulterior motive behind the randomness of this water endeavor, however Jungkook seems content. Pleased, even? It's strange, really, and after drinking a second time, he says "I half expected it to be spiked."

"Not this time. But the next one? Who knows."

Taehyung huffs. He hands his glass to Jungkook who rests it on the nightstand. Taehyung yawns as he stretches along the bed and pillows.

"Do you need anything else?"

"No. Why?"

"You tire me with your 'why's. Is it wrong of me to want to take care of my husband?"

"I suppose not," Taehyung mutters, too fatigued to argue. "You're not doing this because you feel like you have to repay me for what happened in the forest, right?"

"I'm not, I promise. I just want to do it."

"A'ight."

Akin to earlier, Jungkook plasters himself against Taehyung's side and finds a spot half laid atop Taehyung's chest. Once nestled, he makes a small noise of happiness. "Are you comfortable?"

"Sleep."

"Mhm, sleep well, Taehyung."

Time elapses, and Taehyung never comes close to falling asleep no matter how exhausted he is.

Jungkook, however, becomes heavier atop Taehyung, his breathing slow and even.

Taehyung looks ahead without really seeing anything.

He’s still dizzy from the relief of having escaped the man with the scent, where unlike before, his wings have only been torn from him once. He’s still angsty to know that the man will be looking for him again, that he won’t be waiting for years this time. It’s only a matter of time before Taehyung has to explain everything to the others. He’s not looking forward to speak about his past and the nightmare, especially considering—

“I heard counting griffins is a great method to fall asleep.”

“Shut up.”

“You can’t sleep or you don’t want to?”

“Both."

“Revna used to pee everywhere when she was little,” Jungkook suddenly reveals.

The blanket bumps as Revna glides under it and she must nip at him because he startles with a yelp. Taehyung bites on the inner side of his cheek when his lips twitch upward.

“She was a really tiny snake when I got her," Jungkook resumes, "so I grew up with her in a way, right? Meaning that I had to train her because she’d release herself everywhere at first. She even peed on me. Several times.”

A series of long, winded clicks of tongue and hisses follows Jungkook’s admission. Jungkook bursts into laughter.

“What did she say?”

“A very explicit tirade of insults,” Jungkook says and Taehyung snorts. “One day she purposefully peed on the Queen and *that* was both the funniest and most terrifying thing because I thought Seohyung was about to kill Revna, and I mean, Seohyung *did* want to, but…”

Jungkook’s tales drown Taehyung’s thoughts.

Taehyung closes his eyes, a smile floating on his lips.

The next morning, Taehyung finds his bed occupied not by Jungkook, but by Jimin who’s clinging onto Taehyung like a damn kraken.

“Can I *please* have *my* bed to myself for one second.”

“You had it all to yourself for two weeks,” Jimin retorts.

“Did I, though? Mom told me you’d sleep in it.”

“I was reminiscing about when you’d sleep in my bed because I was scared of the dark.”

Taehyung blows a puff of air. He doesn't mind the company at all, *but still.*

He observes Jungkook who walks inside with a tray brimming with food. Taehyung's stomach grumbles.

Taehyung had woken up two or three hours or so ago. The bed had been empty at first and panic had swallowed him before the sound of voices and laughter had pierced through the ringing in his ears. Taehyung had been gripping at his bed sheets and blankly staring ahead. It had taken a while for him to abate the erratic pulsations of his heart, for his mind to find its way back to the present, however Jimin's presence had been a guide as the two of them had hugged in silence.

"Jimin? Can you step out for a moment? I need to talk to the Prince about a couple things."

"Yeah of course." Jimin leaps off the bed.

"Is everyone downstairs? Hoseok and Seokjin too?"

"Yup. No one has been leaving since we found you both."

Taehyung nods. "We'll come downstairs in a few."

"Take your time," Jimin smiles, walking out of the room.

Jungkook leaves the tray on Taehyung's lap. There are eight plates, two empty bowls along with two cups of water on it that Taehyung quirks a brow at. "You didn't get breakfast?"

"No, not yet."

"It's nearly noon and you woke up hours before me."

"I wasn't that hungry." Jungkook settles in front of Taehyung, sitting on his feet as he always does. Revna curls into a ball at the foot of the mattress.

"That's not true!" Jimin interjects behind the door. "He's been eating for ten since he woke up!"

Jungkook scowls. "Quiet!"

Taehyung shakes his head. He grabs a pair of chopsticks and a bowl that he fills with some vegetables, a grilled egg and a few pieces of meat. He hands it to Jungkook but when the latter does not take it, Taehyung glances up at him.

Jungkook's gaze darts between the bowl and Taehyung. "Is it for me?"

"It's to you that I'm giving it?"

"Oh," Jungkook breathes out. He's tentative when he takes the bowl, his fingers brushing against Taehyung's. A flush tints Jungkook's cheeks. "Thank you."

Jimin barges inside and the only reason why Taehyung does not slam the door shut with a flick of his wrist is because Jimin is balancing two additional trays of food that he drops on the nightstand. "Thanks, maid," Taehyung teases. His head jerks backward when a crumpled piece of parchment is hurled at his forehead.

“Asshole,” Jimin snips and leaves.

Taehyung serves himself next.

He and Jungkook begin to eat, one elegantly, the other wolfing down serving after serving.

Half an hour later, the trays are empty and plates stacked together.

Taehyung reclines against the headboard, a hand rubbing his full belly. Jungkook draws his legs up and he wraps himself in a blanket, forming a mountain of fluffy comforters in front of Taehyung.

“What did you tell the others?”

“Nothing."

“At all?”

“I wanted to wait for you to wake up. I didn’t want to say something you wanted to keep for ourselves. But, uhm… Everyone saw your back, so they know about that.”

“I figured as much.”

“Your grandfather and an Elder healed them back though, and they said everything is as it usually is.”

Taehyung hasn’t turned to his dragon form yet, and neither has he tried to summon his wings out.

“How’s your arcane?”

“It’s entirely back.”

Jungkook huffs a puff of air that sounds oddly relieved. “That’s good. I think that’s why you slept for two weeks straight.”

“Probably, yeah.”

Jungkook peers outside the window, resting his cheek atop his knees. “I don’t know where to start.”

Taehyung leans forward, digging an elbow on his knee to support his head in his palm. “You raised the dead.”

“Straight to the point, uh?”

“Was it— Have you ever done something like that before?”

“Never. What I’ve told you about my arcane is true. All I’ve ever known is that I can help souls pass and communicate with them. It never crossed my mind that I could manipulate skeletons or corpses.”

“I suppose this ability needed some sort of trigger."

“I didn’t even think about doing that. Raising the dead, I mean. It just sort of… happened. After seeing Dohyun—” Jungkook lowers the blanket to wrap his arms around his legs. “I was so angry and terrified. So *mad,* and my arcane was too.”

“Does your arcane feel any different since then?” Taehyung asks and Jungkook utters a quiet *‘No’*. “Can you summon it right now? I’d like to have a look at your sigils.”

Jungkook does as asked, his eyes turning black. He extends his arms toward Taehyung who tugs the sleeves upward.

Taehyung holds Jungkook’s hands in his own to inspect the jet black tattoos and sigils. They haven’t changed at all. “I don’t think you raising the dead is an evolution of your arcane, but rather something that you’ve always been capable of and that had simply been dormant. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve done that without noticing when you were younger and couldn’t control your arcane.”

“It didn’t happen when I was younger,” Jungkook derides with a twisted smile. “I always needed to have good control of my arcane.”

“Why? Your parents forced you?”

“No. It’s complicated.”

Taehyung drops Jungkook’s hands. His eyes flit on Jungkook’s pinched face as the tattoos retract. “I’ve always wondered,” Taehyung says.

Jungkook hums a humorless chuckle.

“I know arcane can skip generations. As far as I know, your parents don’t manipulate any.”

“They don’t.”

“Does anyone in their ancestors do?” Taehyung continues.

A wariness wraps around Jungkook, one that Taehyung hasn’t seen since Jungkook had first arrived in Vanae. “What do you think?”

“I think none of Seohyung or Sungmin’s ancestors are warlocks. I think the Queen and King aren’t your biological parents. That’d explain the way they treat you, especially Seohyung. I also noticed you rarely refer to them as your parents.”

“You can’t tell anyone, Taehyung."

“I won’t.”

Jungkook's fingers clutch at the blanket. “The Queen isn’t my biological mother, but the king is my biological father. Sungmin is… He always gives Seohyung everything she wants, both because he has always been very accommodating to her, but also to make up for a past mistake.”

“Which past mistake?”

“Me. It’s boring, and a tale as old as the world, but Seohyung is infertile. I know it led to many arguments between her and my father, and I guess their relationship took a hit from it since they couldn’t produce the highly expected heir to the throne. My father met a woman one day and had an affair with her. She was a necromancer but he didn’t know about it until I unfortunately started manifesting my necromancy. Then… Then more stuff happened, but I’m keeping it to myself.”

“I’m asking because if you find your mother, you can also find answers about your arcane.”

“I don’t know if I want to meet her… If she’s still alive. I’m content with not knowing anything about her for now.”

Taehyung nods. “If so, we’ll have to do some searches. We can ask the Elders if you’re comfortable with it. Raising the dead didn’t seem to be without conse—” He pauses when he catches *something* that lightens Jungkook’s gaze. “What?”

“Thank you for not pushing." Jungkook doesn’t smile, per se, but there’s a softness to his voice.

“It’s nothing."

“It’s not nothing, Taehyung.”

Taehyung waves a hand and clears his throat. “Raising the dead took its toll on you. How much do you remember?”

“All I can recall are pain and touches soothing it.”

“I think I know what was happening.” Taehyung leans forward as Jungkook does, curiosity flickering in Jungkook’s eyes. “You woke up several times, and each time you behaved as if you had been hurt in specific ways. One moment you thought your leg had been chopped off, the next your arm, then you acted like you were being disemboweled and another while later I’m pretty sure you thought someone had slit your throat.”

Jungkook’s brows fly up his forehead. “Really?”

“It was a little spooky, honestly,” Taehyung admits, the remnants of their trek through the forest still fresh in his head. “I think you were experiencing the deaths of those you revived. One must have died from blood loss through an amputated leg, and this is what you felt.”

“That’s… Oh my God,” Jungkook whispers with barely contained enthusiasm.

Taehyung should probably be weirded out about it but it’d be hypocritical of him considering that he, himself, is trying his damnedest to shove down his own buzz at learning more about Jungkook's necromancy.

“That makes sense. God, this is— Am I insane for finding this exciting?”

“If it is then I’m insane too."

Jungkook laughs in the crook of his elbow. “But that means that I can’t raise anyone willy-nilly.”

“And it’s especially risky because while you can’t directly die from pain, if said pain is acute enough, it can send you into shock or provoke a heart attack or something akin to that."

“Aww,” Jungkook croons. “Are you worried that I might die, husband of mine?”

“No. I’m just saying,” Taehyung shrugs and slumps backward.

“Well.” Jungkook scoots toward Taehyung to settle next to him and drape the blankets over their legs. “I’ll be careful to not recklessly raise the dead. I don’t even know how I did it to begin with.”

“You can train.”

“On what?”

Good question.

“You can try with whatever prey the basilisk—” Taehyung yanks his foot away from Revna when her fangs nibble onto a toe. “ *Revna* brings you. Like small rodents.”

“Are we really about to terrorize rodents? They’ll send a warning about us to their peers soon,” Jungkook jests. Taehyung shakes his head as he bites back a smile. “We should tell the others about it.”

“You’re fine with Hoseok and Seokjin knowing?”

“They do already.”

“ *What?”*

“I woke up ten days before you did. The Elders had put me in an induced coma, of some sort? To help with the pain. When I woke up, I learned that Hoseok already knew about my arcane through Hyuna, so I also told Seokjin.”

“Wait. Backtrack on that. How do Hyuna and Hoseok know?”

“Remember that Dohyun was the one with us when we visited her. So he knew she had found out something about me and… And he extracted the answers out of her. Hoseok found her with a missing arm, and that’s how he got to know as well.”

Taehyung rubs his palms down his face. He dreads the upcoming conversation with his family. “This is a fucking mess.”

“We don’t have to say everything. Just the essentials?”

“They should know as much as possible to make sure we’re all on the same page."

“Can we agree on a word?”

Taehyung looks at Jungkook. “How so?”

“If we want the other to help us. For example, if you want me to divert the attention away from you in the discussion, you can say the word, and I’ll interfere. And you could do the same for me and *actually* step in,” Jungkook adds with an elegantly arched brow.

“Why do I feel like you’ve already thought of a word…”

“Storm,” Jungkook confirms without missing a beat.

Taehyung levels the Prince with a stony stare.

Jungkook grins, undeterred. “You like storms, so do I. You find comfort in them, I do too. So. Storm?”

“Sure, storm,” Taehyung agrees with a vague motion as he leaves the bed. “Let’s talk to them now. If you’re ready?”

“I am,” Jungkook says with a resolution that Taehyung borrows from to strengthen his own.

After plucking the trays from the nightstand, Taehyung and Jungkook both make their way to the first floor where the others await them.

The crowded living room falls quiet at their arrival, the two of them met with smiles and kind gazes.

“Hey lovebirds,” Hoseok says, breaking the silence that isn’t terse but not quite serene either.

Taehyung grabs the tray Jungkook is holding to deposit them near the kitchen sink. He then makes his way toward the living room next, frowning when he sees that Jungkook is already installed in the exact armchair Taehyung had intended to occupy.

Taehyung lightly kicks Jungkook’s shin. “Get off.”

“I got there first."

“I don’t care. Get off. It’s my armchair.”

“Your armchair is in the living room of our hou—”

Taehyung lifts Jungkook by the armpits to maneuver him out of the chair, effectively making it available for *Taehyung* to plop on.

"You’re such a prick,” Jungkook retorts but it’s hindered by the levity of a chuckle.

“I know,” is all that Taehyung answers, comfortably reclined in the cushiony armchair.

“I was there first. You get off now.”

“Nope.”

Jungkook tilts his head up, looking like the regal Prince that he is demanding his due. “I will sit on you.”

“There are children in this house,” Jimin whisper-yells as he covers Hoseok’s eyes.

Those in the living room burst into laughter, all except Jungkook who splutters and stumbles over his words. “I— I didn’t mean it like that!”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes! Oh my God.” Jungkook glances down at Taehyung and when Taehyung quirks a brow, a blush colors Jungkook’s neck. He covers his face and swivels around to drop on the ground, right in front of the armchair and between Taehyung’s legs.

Junhyun and Jimin stand to bring an array of pastries that everyone promptly devours.

“Now that everyone has had their beverage and is comfortably seated,” Dahee begins, then peers at Taehyung and Jungkook, “it is perhaps time to speak about all that has happened.”

Taehyung sits up. “Yeah.”

Jungkook, propped on a cushion at Taehyung’s feet, peers up at him, the hoops of his earrings swaying when his head turns. “We can start with me,” Jungkook offers.

Taehyung agrees, thankful.

“As you already know, I’m a necromancer, and something occurred that awoke a hidden talent that I have, so to speak.” Jungkook snorts to himself and Taehyung flicks the back of his head. “I found out what one of the ancient arcanes I have is about.”

Everyone erupts into noncommittal sounds of surprise.

“Which arcane?”

“I may have… raised the dead?”

A quietude stretches, blinks are blinked, and mouths part open.

“ *What?!”*

“It’s a long story.” Jungkook glances over his shoulder at Taehyung. “How much…”

“Everything,” Taehyung answers.

Jungkook begins to recount all that has gone down at the manor.

He tells everyone about the imprisonment that he glazes over. He explains then about the rat bone plan that leaves more than half of those listening amused, the others concerned. When he mentions having fought two guards alone while being handcuffed, it’s with a certain pride that he radiates with as whistles erupt in the living room.

Jungkook flushes under the attention. Taehyung would go as far as saying that Jungkook preens, and he seems to do even more when Taehyung admits — through a nod — that he had also been impressed by Jungkook’s display of skills.

As the tale continues and reaches the part where his newfound ability had been awakened, Jungkook pauses to survey Taehyung. He doesn’t mention the wings, instead he says “Everything has been a blur after that because of the pain. Taehyung and I suppose that the pain I felt belonged to the people I raised and the way they died.”

“Shit,” Namjoon blurts out.

“I assume an arcane like necromancy comes with a cost,” Junhyun hums to himself.

“Yes, so that’s something to figure out later."

“What about Dohyun?” The venom in Jimin’s interjection throws a glacial bucket in the room. “This Dohyun guy, he’s the same one who—”

“Yeah.” Taehyung folds his hands between his knees, his fingers gripped together. “You saw my shoulders. His warlock forced the wings out of my back. Then he cut them.”

“This is what sparked me into raising the dead,” Jungkook says amidst the heavy silence.

“By the Elders.” Jimin cards a hand through his hair, probably to stop himself from punching a wall.

“He—” Taehyung slowly exhales through his nose when a flare of anxiety sinks within his chest. “I have seven breaths. I’m a chaos dragon, as most of you know. One of my breaths is regenerative healing." He glances at Minsoo who’s here as well, standing in the kitchen. “Meaning that I can heal wounds fast. Really fast. I can also regrow limbs. Technically. And for a price. Do— He— *Fuck*.”

Taehyung’s nails dig into the back of his hands when the pain that never leaves his shoulders ignites alive at the bare, half mention of the man with the scent. He watches Revna slither up his wrist to drape around his neck.

“You don’t have to share anything, my son,” Dahee reassures.

“I know,” Taehyung snaps. “I was taken away about six years ago. I had met a human who betrayed me. And manipulated me to sell me in an auction at a black market. That’s where the man with the scent bought me.”

"Selling— Selling *you?"*

"I was merchandise there."

“Oh. I... I wasn't aware this could be a thing..." Namjoon trails off.

Taehyung's gaze focuses on the jewelry Jungkook wears. “He bought me. He kept me locked in a room. He has a warlock working for him. Probably more. Yumi’s the main one. She created runes to seal all of my breath minus the healing one. They also sealed my ability to turn into dragon." His words are mechanical, his voice clipped. “Back then I did try to escape at first. Never led to anything good. He calls me his dove, ‘cause he’d sell part of me. All the time I was with him, he wou— He—” Jungkook has five hoops on the right ear, from the lobe and upward. Jungkook has five more on the left ear. Three on the lobe and two helix. Taehyung continues to count them. “He cut my wings. Again. And again. Every time they’d be fully regrown, he’d cut them.”

“How long do they take to regrow?” Yoongi asks.

“Twelve to fifteen days. Sometimes more. It was slower back then.” Taehyung lies for two reasons: first to avoid any pity, and second because he does not believe that his parents and Jimin will come out unscathed from knowing the truth.

“This is—” Jimin stands and begins to pace around, a hand covering his mouth as tears escape his eyes.

Dahee rises on her feet as well. She makes her way to the kitchen where she fiddles with the cutlery, her back to the rest of the room. She only stops when Minsoo rests a hand on her shoulder.

“Fuck." Jimin halts.

Taehyung peers at him, and he has never been more grateful to have lied.

"You— You stayed with him for nearly six months, Taehyung."

“This man is… He's in love with me, in his own fucked up way,” Taehyung says. “He doesn’t see tearing my wings as an inhuman or a torture, but rather as…”

“Bonding,” Jungkook finishes for Taehyung. “He told me that.”

“Bonding? Fucking bonding, of all things?” Hoseok’s eyes turn to those of his dragon counterpart, shining a deep green.

“He—”

Rattling erupts in the kitchen.

Metal against metal.

The living room vanishes from Taehyung’s view.

He’s back on the chair, his wrists fastened on the armrest. He swears he can smell putrid mint and coal. Clangs of the chains ring between his ears and when he peers down, his vision of the armchair and a head bleeds with the one of a metal seat and cold stone. The presence of the shackles weigh Taehyung’s wrists. The nails of his right hand scratch back and forth on the skin of his left one to remove the cuffs but *they’re still here.*

Something soft curls around his left wrist.

A hand, Taehyung realizes, one with a diamond ring suffused with lightning, clouds and rain. His lids flutter as his eyes try to find their way back to reality.

“Storm."

Jungkook's index finger taps four times, then pauses for four seconds before tapping once more while his thumb rubs back and forth. Jungkook's fingers are soft and gentle, not cold and harsh like the shackles are. *Had been.* Taehyung isn’t back in the room again. He’s safe.

“We have to find a way to get rid of Dohyun, and I don’t mean simply locking him away in a cell," Jungkook carries on, continuing the conversation. "Dohyun has to die.”

Jungkook's timber is somber and resolute, an anchor to the present that Taehyung focuses on.

The cell disappears from Taehyung’s eyes little by little. He feels a hand that passes through his hair then a pair of lips that presses on his crown as Dahee walks by him.

“Isn’t he just human?” Namjoon wonders.

“He is. I don’t think he’s a warlock at all,” Jungkook muses.

“Then we can go to him and fucking kill him,” Jimin snips.

“He has Yumi protecting him, including more warlocks from what I could gather,” Jungkook retorts. “Finding him isn’t easy either.”

“Plus Seungwon works for him,” Taehyung adds.

“We can kill them both," Jimin scoffs. "It’s been long overdue for Seungwon."

“Another problem is that he and Seungwon know about the Viper's arcane,” Taehyung declares. “He’ll want me back, but chances are that he also wants the Prince as well now.”

“Fucking hell.” Dahee nestles herself against Junhyun’s side. “We need to think. Dohyun is not the sole matter we must resolve.” Hers and Taehyung’s eyes meet.

“Is this about what you have been hiding, Darling?” Junhyun inquires with a pat on his mate’s leg.

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing more urgent than tearing Dohyun apart once and for all,” Jimin says. “Anything else doesn’t fucking matter.”

“There is one, Jimin,” Dahee calmly says. “After much discussion, the Elders have given me the approval to share a certain knowledge with the seven of you. I’m not certain why, but they, themselves, have requested me to do so.”

Seokjin and Hoseok peer at each other. “What is happening…?”

Dahee leans forward to silently rest her cup on the table, then she speaks.

“There is an evil, a plague killing dragonborns. It has no cure, no understanding, and it has been mangling our kind for years now. It kills at every change of season. The next pulse of the plague will be in a few weeks. It has begun already.”

Dahee launches herself into a deeper explanation.

In retrospect, everyone is taking the news quite well.

They ask questions, of course, especially Hoseok and Seokjin. Dahee does her best to answer them.

Dahee assures that everyone in the room is safe, and it helps ease the tension. She doesn’t mention the graveyard in her basement, but she does mention the pit Seungwon had found.

Jungkook is eerily quiet, Taehyung notes as an hour passes. The Prince seems lost in thoughts and Taehyung can see the cogwheels twist and turn in his mind.

Jungkook must land on some kind of conclusion because his fingers tighten around Taehyung’s wrist. He peers up at him. “Dohyun and Seungwon work together, right? That much we’re certain of,” he says and the flitting chat in the room pauses.

“Yes,” Taehyung says.

“As far as I know, only Seohyung and Sungming are aware of the primordial stone’s existence. I have never, *ever* seen Dohyun at the citadel. Not a single time, so I highly doubt Dohyun has come to know about the stone through my parents. Someone else has been the messenger.”

“Seungwon.” Taehyung straightens up on his seat, propping his arms on his knees. Revna falls down his back from where she had been sleeping on his shoulders — not without hissing in protest.

“Seohyung and Sungmin have been *very* adamant about Seungwon, and it has always felt so out of the blue. "

“However if Seungwon is useful to them to, let's say, find the primordial stone that resides on dragonborn lands," Taehyung continues, "then it makes sense."

“Exactly.” Jungkook shuffles from where he’s plopped on the ground between Taehyung’s legs to sit up on his knees. “And it’s why they really wanted me to marry a dragonborn."

“What does it have to do with the plague?” Namjoon hums.

Jungkook's head tilts. “I’m not sure."

“What were you thinking?” Taehyung asks because he has a feeling Jungkook’s conclusions haven’t stopped quite yet.

“Seungwon knows about the pit of bones caused by the plague, *and* he also knows about the primordial stone, and something bothers me about it. I feel like the answer is right in front of me but I can’t quite grasp it.”

“So Seungwon, Seohyung and Sungming work together,” Jimin concludes.

"I can’t imagine any other way for Seungwon to know about the stone and then be able to share about it with Dohyun,” Jungkook answers Jimin yet his gaze does not budge from where it’s settled on Taehyung. “And remember what I said during the first dinner we had here?”

“You said you believed Amaris’ rulers were perhaps looking for a way to eradicate dragonborns.” Taehyung’s mind churns as he lifts a thumb to his mouth. “What if this is what the primordial stone is for?”

“Exactly!” Jungkook excitedly pats Taehyung’s knees. “What if the stone can be used for, or *with* the plague?”

“Seungwon's research about the stone could be exactly what has led him to the pit of bones."

“Meaning that there may be a link between the plague and the primordial stone."

“What could it be though?”

“Well... I don't know. This is complicated,” Jungkook sighs and rests his head on one of Taehyung’s knees. “Let’s say an arcanic illness is killing dragonborns, and you want to make it worse, what could work?”

“Maybe something that can direct the plague? Or expand it? Or channel it?” Taehyung theorizes.

“Maybe, yes. That would be difficult though."

“Yeah.”

“Why are we even here?” Yoongi pipes up.

Jimin chuckles at the warlock’s jest.

“I don’t know, but they’re getting close to an interesting point,” Hoseok shrugs.

Taehyung and Jungkook debate together for a little longer, the others joining as well as.

Taehyung soon falls quiet, lost in his own thoughts. His gaze drifts across the room. It lands on a stem of nixes placed in a vase.

An idea pops in his mind.

He watches Jungkook who’s also staring at the flowers.

“What if it’s like nixes?” Taehyung and Jungkook both blurt out.

“Yes!" Jungkook straightens up.

“Like a golden Nix."

“An enhancer."

“One potent enough to make the plague so powerful that it could kill every single dragonborn at once.”

“That… That could be it,” Jungkook mumbles, staring up at Taehyung, and he has this odd look in his eyes again that he had sported when Taehyung had explained more about how arcanes work weeks ago.

“What?”

Jungkook shakes his head and averts his eyes. “Nothing.”

“Why would Seungwon agree to find such a detrimental object for dragonborns?" Dahee counters.

“Perhaps he or someone else has found a way to protect themselves from the plague?"

“Seungwon would agree to let his own peers die if it leads to him being the only one in a position of power,” Jimin waves off.

“We could be entirely wrong, but now that we’ve talked about this, I can’t get out of my head the hypothesis that the primordial stone and the plague may be linked," Jungkook says.

Taehyung agrees. “I think there *is* a correlation. We just need to figure out which one before Seohyung and Sungmin do.”

“We thankfully have time. As I said, if any of us were to be a victim of the plague, we would have already died, yet none of us has," Dahee says. “For the first time since the plague has been occurring, we finally have a sliver of hope on finding information about it.”

“Like I said before, I’m here to help since I can communicate with dragonborn souls,” Jungkook offers.

“We deeply appreciate it, Jungkook,” Dahee smiles, her eyes grateful.

“We should handle it all at once. It’s only a matter of time before the man with the scent knows everything there is to know about the stone, and perhaps the plague as well through Seungwon. I don't want to imagine what a coalition between him and Seohyung would look like."

“Dohyun first,” Jimin snips.

“The next pulse of the plague will happen regardless. We have to wait for Yoongi to finish working on the helpful trinkets he is making, and most importantly, we need to rest. It has all been a lot for each one of us, more specifically for you both,” Dahee adds, peering at Taehyung and Jungkook. “You both need peace for some time, and to not let the guilt riddle you about granting rest to yourself.”

“Starting with our date,” Jungkook exclaims, unnecessarily loud, heard by *all* in the living room.

“Your what?” Jimin gasps.

“Taehyung is taking me out on a date,” Jungkook grins at Jimin.

“I’m not,” Taehyung interjects but he’s ignored by everyone.

“Do you already know what you’re gonna wear?” Jimin asks and Jungkook shakes his head. “We could go shopping together! And I could help you dress up too! Oh, oh, and we could visit a shop that has some really nice jewelry. Do you like makeup?”

Taehyung would contest more at the way Jungkook and Jimin both excitedly converse about the future outing that will *not* be a date, however he chooses not to. Jimin is smiling, his shoulders loosened. Plus Taehyung is distracted by the way Minsoo discreetly sneaks out of the room to walk toward the back of the house where the garden is.

Taehyung stands and makes his way outside after pushing Jungkook away with the sole of his foot.

He finds his grandfather loitering on a bench and he joins him, dropping down on Minsoo’s left side with a sigh.

“What."

“Are you leaving?”

“In a few.”

“You can stay longer if you want." Taehyung hasn’t gotten the chance to spend much time with his grandfather lately, and he misses the old man.

“Too many people,” Minsoo says with a forged shudder.

Taehyung chuckles. Curious about something, he goes “Did you really not heal the Prince?”

Minsoo tuts. His heavy work shoes shuffle across the grass. He brings to his mouth the stem of a plant that tastes like honey. “Don’t tell your mother or I won’t hear the end of it.”

Taehyung bursts into laughter. “I fucking knew it.”

“Shut up, kid.”

“I won’t tell her.”

“How the fuck did you know?”

“You’re a good man,” Taehyung simply says. “He did save my life, of course you’d help him in return.”

“I still don’t trust him. You shouldn’t either.”

Taehyung’s smile drops. He tucks his hands in his pants’ pockets. “He’s different.”

“Remember the last time you trusted a human because you thought he was different?”

The low blow feels like a punch on Taehyung's face, his mouth twisting around a snarl.

“Sorry. Shouldn’t have said that. You know it wasn’t your fault. What happened back then.”

“The Prince isn’t like Jongsuk.”

“He could be.”

“Jungkook isn’t like Jongsuk. He's been here for long enough for me to see the differences between them. They’re nothing alike.”

“I can’t believe that after my grandson nearly died before my eyes. You've lied to the others, but I know this fucking Dohyun tore your wings every damn day you were with him.”

“If you can’t believe that, leave." Taehyung's glare bores onto his grandfather’s. "At the end of the day, Jungkook *is* my husband, whether you or I accept it. You know what humans have done to me. You know how *he* violated me. They tore me apart and only Elders know how many of them are wearing my skin, parading with my scales,” he rasps, his nails sinking into his palms. “But even then I know Jungkook isn’t one of those humans. I may have been blinded before, but now I— Mother is right. She’s been right all along.”

“That boy corrupted your damn mind."

“I’ve been an asshole to him since day one, Minsoo. I nearly left him alone in the middle of Vanae the very first day he got here. I followed him at night because I was suspicious of his actions. I antagonized him every damn day at every chance I got. Seungwon even hit him at our wedding and you know what I did? Nothing. I stood there and I did nothing and I wish I could go back and change that but I can’t.”

“So what?”

“Want to know what Jungkook has given me in return? Kindness, understanding, and a hell lot of patience that I don't fucking deserve. Yet he—"

Jungkook's laugh is carried through the garden by an opened window. Taehyung gazes at him.

"I didn’t think being taken away by the man with the scent again would be what opens my eyes, but I guess there was a silver lining in this and— And I think I already knew Jungkook isn't like them. Like *him.* But I was—” Taehyung pauses, overcome with an emotion he can’t decipher. “He saved

my life when he could have left me to rot in that cell for valid reasons. Because he's a selfless fucking idiot like that. He risked his life for mine, and it's a debt I'll owe him forever."

"This debt is why you're sounding so damn smitten?"

"No. And I'm not smitten," Taehyung mumbles and Minsoo scoffs. "I'm not. I'm just saying that… That you should give him a chance, like I'll be doing. He deserves that much. He still would even if he hadn't saved me."

"You were more fun when you were single."

Taehyung sputters at the quip then purses his lips. "Don't say that…"

Minsoo chuckles, his defensive edge softening.

"Will you give him a chance or not?"

"Why does it matter if I do?"

"Because you're my family. He isn't part of it, but he is my husband."

"Do you trust him?"

Does he trust Jungkook?

Taehyung doesn't really know, which is strange on its own. Before he would have answered with a prompt and obstinate 'No'.

"I don't distrust him anymore."

Minsoo hums.

Taehyung observes Vane's forest that stretches before him and he closes his eyes to bask in the sunlight that bathes him, in the breeze that brushes against his skin. He remembers those afternoons where the man with the scent would bring him outside. He recalls how peaceful those instances were, yet preceded with violent ones of his wings being torn.

"Did he really raise the damn dead?"

"Yeah," Taehyung chuckles. "It was both terrifying and fascinating."

The sight back then had been morbidly beautiful.

"Must have been. A field full of moving skeletons." Minsoo shivers. "This kid's dangerous."

"He can't control this ability yet."

"And when he will? Imagine the anarchy he can create if he has an army of undead humans. Of undead *dragons.* Any fight against him would be an inevitable loss. Each death in the enemy camp or his own would become a new weapon for him. Necromancy was expunged for a reason, kid."

Well.

Taehyung had not really pondered about all this nonsense.

“Good thing he’s on our side,” Taehyung settles on saying.

“We’ll see about that.”

Taehyung rolls his eyes.

“Don’t be so petulant. You’re hanging out too much with your mother.”

“She *is* my mother.”

“Yeah, you’re your mother’s boy alright, that we all know.”

“I’m not!”

“*‘But, but, Soosoo. I can’t go because Mom said I should finish this homework,’”* Minsoo mocks and it’s ridiculous how the burly dragonborn’s voice takes a high-pitched yet gravelly intonation.

“I was a child!”

“*‘But, but, Soosoo, Mom said it’s not okay to do that.”*”

Taehyung gasps and glares at his grandfather. “I know which day it was and that day you were trying to convince me to eat a raven nix!”

“*‘Soosoo, look what Mom did’, ‘Soosoo, Mom’s so pretty, that’s why I’m pretty too, ‘cause you’re not pretty Soosoo’*,” Minsoo imitates. “You were a horrible kid. No brain to mouth filter. A terror.”

“That must be why you were always hanging out with me and sulking when I couldn’t because I was busy with my lessons.” Taehyung blinks the prickling that rises in his eyes.

“No need to talk about that nonsense."

“I still remember the time where you helped me escape my bedroom when I was grounded, and then *you* and I were both grounded when Mom found us digging gems in a cave.”

“My daughter can’t ground me.”

“It sure seemed like she had back then.”

“Yeah, yeah, shut up, kid,” Minsoo tuts as he stands, Taehyung mirroring him.

Taehyung smiles when Minsoo ruffles his hair. “Will you visit again?”

“Not when there’s so many humans *and* a basilisk? A basilisk?”

“She’s not too bad."

“I brought some food, s’in the cooler. Take some,” Minsoo dismisses.

Ah, yes. Sometimes Taehyung makes the mistake of forgetting that his family’s main love language is food, and an *absurd* amount of it. “Thanks.”

“And this Dohyun coward,” Minsoo says, his levity gone. “You won’t live with the terror of him looming over your head for much longer, kiddo. I promise.”

Taehyung nods, lips pressed together, engulfed in his grandfather's arms. When they break the hug, Minsoo quickly swivels around however not fast enough for Taehyung to not catch the tears in Minsoo's eyes.

"See ya later, kid."

"Bye." Taehyung watches his grandfather turn to his dragon self, and, with a swipe of his tail on Taehyung's crown, he flies off, disappearing in the sky.

When Taehyung turns around, he's met with the Prince peering at him from the exit door. "Oh. He's leaving?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

"Revna wants to talk to you? I'm not sure about what. She's being very cryptic," Jungkook explains.

Taehyung's eyes narrow but he follows Jungkook inside the living room where he finds his spot on the armchair. Jungkook sits on its armrest, Revna coiled around his shoulders.

"Gonna tell me what it is now?" Jungkook inquires. Revna's head moves to face Jungkook. She begins to 'talk'. "Oh," Jungkook says. Revna speaks again and a bright smile curls his mouth as he laughs. "Yes, I'd be more than okay with it. I like this idea a lot, actually. You want me to ask him?"

"Ask me *what?"* Taehyung says.

"So." Jungkook twists to properly peer down at Taehyung. Revna's head is next to his own, the Prince and the basilisk's attention fixated on Taehyung.

Taehyung squints back at them.

"Revna has something very important to ask you."

Taehyung leans away from the duo as his suspicion heightens. "About?"

Revna talks before Jungkook does and he nods. "She says you have to think very carefully before answering, and that she'll be sad if you refuse."

"Am I about to be guilt tripped?"

"Possibly," Jungkook says, interrupted by Revna. "She says she won't but she'll definitely guilt trip you." Revna nibbles Jungkook's cheek. "Anyway. Taehyung."

"What."

"Do you w—"

Revna hisses then bites Jungkook's shoulder.

"I was about to ask him but— I *am* being solemn? What else am I supposed to do?!"

Revna must spit some kind of expletive because Jungkook frowns at her and says “First of all, watch your tone, young lady. Second of all, you didn’t even hear the end of my sentence, so how can you know that it wasn’t formulated well enough for you?” Revna makes a motion of her head. “Don’t roll your eyes at me."

Revna chats some more, and after her tirade that lasts for a couple minutes, Jungkook sighs but nods.

“Alright. Taehyung,” Jungkook starts again, “as we agreed upon our wedding vows, what is yours is mine, and what is mine is yours, as such, it would be *your* greatest pleasure if you would do *us* the honor of wearing Revna’s necklace.”

Taehyung rapidly blinks.

Surely, he must have heard that wrong.

“Pardon?”

“Revna would like you to wear the ruby.” Jungkook points at it. Revna folds around Jungkook’s neck a couple times to hide her face amidst her body, only her snout peeking out.

“Why?”

“She said: ‘Because this way I can protect you better.’”

Taehyung’s brows fly up his forehead. He tries to ignore the way his heart squeezes in his chest.

He hears some sniffles erupt from Jimin, Namjoon, Hoseok and Seokjin who are watching the exchange with teary eyes.

“Revna, my lovely. You’re so cute,” Jungkook croons and cups Revna’s head to kiss her crown.

Jimin pretends to wipe his eyes with the collar of Hoseok’s shirt. “She’s too precious for this world."

“She truly is,” Junhyun agrees with a vehement nod.

Taehyung looks at Jungkook and Revna. “I’m not— No. This is— She’s yours.”

“She’s her own being who can make her own decisions. One of them is that she’d love it if we had some kind of joint custody.”

“I’m not wearing a basilisk’s necklace around my neck at all times.”

“We can do it slowly? You wear it for an hour a day?”

“No.”

“Fifty minutes?”

“No.”

“Forty-five?”

“Still no,” Taehyung says but his resolution is faltering. He *is* interested in learning more about the basilisk, admittedly fascinated by her.

“Half an hour?”

While Taehyung’s will does crumble, he waits for Jungkook to lower the time again.

“Twenty-five minutes?”

“Fine. Twenty-five minutes. Once per week,” Taehyung grumbles.

Revna emits a series of long noises. “She says that she doesn’t like how short the period is, but she understands and accepts. Do you want to start right now? She’d like to, if you’re comfortable with it.”

“Sure…” Taehyung won’t say he’s excited about the prospect of wearing a *basilisk’s* necklace only because he doesn’t want to give Jimin any more teasing supply.

Jungkook unfastens the golden necklace. The ruby dangles at the end of the chain when he presents it to Taehyung. “It feels weird to not have it anymore."

“You have the other necklace,” Taehyung says with a look at the wedding gift.

Jungkook smiles, his free hand clasping around the white, iridescent scale. “You're right.”

Taehyung tentatively grabs the necklace.

He doesn’t hesitate for long before he slings the chain around his neck, locking the clasp at the back. The weight is minimal. Barely noticeable, actually, and it surprises him because he’s expecting it to feel constricting and foreign, like the collar he’d be wearing back in the cell.

His muscles that had tense now slacken.

Revna stretches from Jungkook’s shoulder to touch the ruby with her snout, reverting inside it. Her head comes out of the gem a second later to slither around Taehyung’s neck. Taehyung is still a tad uncomfortable with having such a deadly snake so close to his vital point, but he doesn’t say anything, preferring to listen to the series of clicks of tongue Revna makes. He confusedly peers at Jungkook.

“She didn’t speak. These were just happy noises."

It takes all of Taehyung’s self-control to bite back the urge to smile because Revna, a lethal, powerful basilisk, *likes him.*

Him.

She didn’t ask Hoseok or Jimin or anyone else if they could wear her necklace. She asked *Taehyung.*

“Oh I’m never gonna hear the end of this now. He’s gonna be so obnoxiously smug about it,” Jimin grunts.

Taehyung schools any potential traces of his content pride. “I’m not smug about anything."

“You’re holding back a smile,” Jimin retorts. “I know you as though I made you.”

“Don’t be so repulsive.”

Taehyung and Jimin bicker together. Meanwhile Jungkook, still propped on the armrest of Taehyung’s chair, reclines against the backrest. Taehyung does not push him away when their shoulders press together. When the 25 minutes have elapsed, he gives the necklace back to Jungkook, the two of them remaining on their spot.

It’s past midnight, most likely 2 am or 3 am, and Taehyung can’t sleep again.

He had tried but had woken up to a nightmare, and so he had opted to lay down on the rooftop of his childhood house to peer at the clear sky, the stars shining bright above him.

Some grunts and rattle elevate from the balcony of his bedroom.

“God,” Jungkook says once at the top, panting and on his knees. He stands and makes his way toward Taehyung on wobbly legs, flopping down next to him. “This is high. This was way too high. I could have fallen down, cracked my head open and died.”

“That can still be arranged,” Taehyung proposes, arms folded under his head.

Jungkook laughs. “Shut up." He shuffles to lay on his back. "Can’t sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“Me either. I haven’t been sleeping much since we've been back,” Jungkook confesses.

“Minsoo’s gonna make me some tea bags to help with that. I can give you some if you want."

“I’d like that... Thank you.” Jungkook hums a tune to himself — because of course the Prince can sing too —, but he halts a moment later. “Do you know about constellations?”

“I do.” Kija’s mother had taught Taehyung about them.

“Is there anything that you don’t know?”

“Patience.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter, his shoulder bumping against Taehyung’s. “Can you tell me about this one?” He lifts an arm to point at the sky.

“Which one?”

“This one.”

“We don’t have the same eyes, so I don’t know which constellations you’re asking about.”

“This one! The one with the… The thingy.”

Taehyung turns his head to level Jungkook with a stony stare. “The thingy."

“Yes. There’s some kind of hook?”

Taehyung examines the sky. “There isn’t a single hook up there.”

“Whatever. Tell me about this one then.” Like before, he uselessly points above them.

“Which. One.”

“This one with the thingy that crosses the other thingy in the middle of the other thingy and, like, it makes this huge…”

“Thingy?” Taehyung finishes with a deadpan tone.

“I don’t know how to describe it!”

“With words. You know, vocabulary.”

“You’re such a prick." Jungkook rolls his eyes. "And I’ll have you know that my vocabulary is very extensive.”

“I don’t care.”

“Then tell me about this constellation.”

"Which one?!"

"This one, you idiot!"

“I’m this close to pop a vein, Viper,” Taehyung warns and Jungkook, the annoying brat that he is, laughs again.

“I’m really trying to explain,” Jungkook says amidst chuckles and snorts. “Just tell me about any constellation then.”

“This one is said to be the remnants of the most powerful dragonborn that has ever existed,” Taehyung starts and points at the series of stars.

“Which one?”

Taehyung pauses.

“We don’t have the same eyes, so I don’t know which constellation you’re telling me about,” Jungkook downright *sasses* Taehyung.

“I will fucking bite you if you take that tone with me again.”

“I mean... I’m not opposed to it.”

“You’re repulsive. Get off my rooftop.”

“It’s your parents’ rooftop.”

“Either way it’s a rooftop that I will throw you off from if you don’t shut up,” Taehyung threatens, but Jungkook knows it’s empty because he waves him off.

“Sure. Now tell me.”

Taehyung heaves a deep sigh. He tugs Jungkook closer to him and grabs Jungkook’s arm to lift it and have it point ahead. Taehyung’s head hovers above Jungkook’s shoulder. He estimates where to aim the index for Jungkook to see the row of stars Taehyung is speaking about.

“There,” Taehyung says after a few seconds. “Do you see the horns? Next to the oval that looks like a dragon's iris?” Taehyung waits but when Jungkook does not reply, he peers down at him.

Their faces are a few inches apart, and there’s a weird redness tinting Jungkook’s cheeks.

Taehyung jerks away at the unexpected proximity. “Why the fuck are you so close for?”

Jungkook raises on his elbows, his mouth part open and brows furrow in evident offense. “ *You’re* the one who yanked me closer to you?”

“Semantics.”

Jungkook, as Taehyung expects him to, argues. Taehyung argues back, of course, because that’s what he's born to do. And so the two of them continue to bicker and bicker *and bicker* and, really, Taehyung has never met anyone as damn witty and mouthy as the Prince is.

It’s rare for anyone to match — and overpass — Taehyung’s playful — and sometimes not so playful — argumentative nature. But Jungkook takes it with a stride and gives back as much as he receives and more. It’s quite refreshing for Taehyung, who is used to others scurrying away from him or trying to calm him, a stark contrast to how Jungkook prefers to purposefully rile up Taehyung, all while respecting Taehyung’s boundaries.

It’s infuriating, but still refreshing.

His thoughts flicker back to ashen skin, bloody wounds and absence of sound.

Taehyung doesn’t like the Prince, but he prefers him awake and annoyingly lively, where the pale rays of moonlight don’t eclipse the renewed colors dusting Jungkook’s cheeks as his voice fills the air.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you for your patience and all your lovely comments like I’m so emo T____T I’m still catching up on them but I do read them all and as I said before they truly mean the world to me and are the most motivating and reassuring thing seriously :((So thank you for them and don’t hesitate to leave some kudos and comments for this chap hehe 🫶🤍
>
> PS: taekook are demisexual if anyone is wondering!!

❧ Twitter

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Taekook as characters in a game made by ruiifishuu

❧ Video edit of Taekook I made by thviekook
❧ Video edit of Taekook II made by itzkthv

❧ Drawing of Taekook made by thvscunnie

❧ Drawing of Revna (+taekook) made by vkoofroggies
❧ Drawing of Revna made by kthsxmoon
❧ Another drawing of Revna (because she's loved) made by 7btsHigh

❧ Moodboard of Taekook I made by kookvrkive
❧ Moodboard of Taekook II made by vkacademia

❧ Magazine of Taekook made by yooniedumplin

❧ A poem about Taekook made by taekoorkive

Chapter 17: Summersweet Butterflies

Chapter Summary

> Taehyung is lost. Jungkook is too. Taehyung begins to speak more, while Jungkook has yet to learn how to. A date happens, and summer is found amidst winter.

Chapter Notes

> Okay so. I know what I said in my last A/N about how the next chapters won't be as long as the previous one, AND IT WILL HAPPEN after this chapter… 🫠
>
> I'm weak and I failed. To those who read my previous author's note in chap 16, I was supposed to submit a story for a fic fest (I dropped out 💀), but I failed so hard y'all SLB is my muse and apparently writing anything other than that is impossible for me. I couldn't stop thinking of SLB and all I wanted to write was SLB 😭 and I caved in 😭💔
>
> ❧ Twitter
>
> **Small song rec:**
>
> 🍁Solas by Gibran Alcocer, from "The two of them are lounging on Taehyung's mattress, and a matter..." until the end of this scene at "...and he thinks the Prince would like it."
> 🍁If you want some light background music, I recommend this one for the first part of the chapter until the scene with the 'Solas' song, then this one for when Taekook's date begins!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung and Jungkook have been sleeping in the same bed for the past three days that have followed their nightly outing on the house's rooftop. It's not too bad, in retrospect, where Taehyung falls asleep at around 3 am now rather than 5 am, and Jungkook seems to be sleeping better too.

Something bothers Taehyung, however.

It's a discomfort — a concern? — he could not figure out or shake off until today.

At first he had pinned it on this lingering apprehension that festers at knowing that the man with the scent is certainly working on a way to make Taehyung his once and for all. However it's not this.

Jungkook keeps gyrating toward Taehyung.

The Prince's eyes tend to follow Taehyung, often seeking his proximity or presence. While it doesn't necessarily annoy Taehyung, it has him questioning if the Prince is falling into the same

patterns Jimin had sunk into back then.

Everything had been quite messy at first, the Kim family trying but struggling to handle the aftermath of the nightmare that still scar them to this day.

It had taken a while for Jimin to heal from Taehyung's disappearance. Taehyung still remembers how harmful his and Jimin's relationship had been to each other at the time. They wouldn't be able to separate for very long, where some near dependency had developed between them. Dahee and Junhyun had to sit Taehyung and Jimin down to properly talk and send them both to a mind healer.

Months had been needed, but afterwards, everything had improved again, and the fear of Taehyung being taken away once more had ebbed away.

The discomfort that subsists within Taehyung grows the more the way Jungkook behaves with him reminds him of how Jimin had been six years ago.

Taehyung is currently doing the dishes. Jungkook is on his left, the latter rinsing and drying them.

Jungkook is humming a melody under his breath, chatting with Revna whenever the basilisk comes to check up on them only to return outside with Jimin.

Taehyung glances over his shoulders.

Junhyun and Namjoon leave the house. The two of them are on their way to visit a library in Vanae that only opens at night. They have been getting along well, sharing a common passion for writing and literature of all kinds. During that time, Hoseok and Seokjin have gone back to Vanae's market to reopen their tailoring shop again, but they always make sure to visit Taehyung's parents' house every day, sometimes staying the night like yesterday.

So the house is fairly empty this evening, saved for Yoongi, Jimin and Dahee outside in the garden, Revna soon joining them as she slithers up Dahee's leg.

"Don't spend time with me only."

Jungkook pauses, peering up at Taehyung. "Uh?"

"We—" Taehyung's teeth grind, unsure on how to phrase what he wants to say without sounding like an insensitive asshole. "We went through some hellish shit together," he starts and meets Jungkook's confused gaze. "Don't just rely on me. I won't lead to anything… Anything good. It happened before with Jimin and it— It really sucked. So you need to talk to other people, alright? Not just me."

"Oh... I won't. I'm not. I've been talking with Yoongi and Namjoon about it. Your mother too."

Taehyung nods and averts his gaze as he carries on with his task. The discomfort loosens a little more. It's still present, however not as twisted and restless. "Good."

"Are you talking to someone else about it too?"

"My mom and Minsoo."

"That's good."

“I’m also not saying to… I’m not saying to not rely on me at all. You can. If you want."

“Thank you.” Jungkook draws a small smile but there’s a low inflection in his voice that wanes his words. “You can as well.”

“Yeah.”

“Is it still okay if I, uhm... I can be away from you. As in, I’ll be more than fine, and I won’t descend into hysteria if I’m not near you, don’t flatter yourself,” Jungkook mumbles and Taehyung scoffs. “But I want to stay close to you. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

“Is it the same for you?”

Taehyung doesn’t really know. If he's honest with himself for once, he hasn’t really minded being near Jungkook, even before the manor clusterfuck.

“You don’t know."

“Can you secretly read minds?”

“No. I'm starting to know my husband, shocker."

“How about you rinse and dry the new dishes instead of wiping the same one like you have for the past minute?”

A rosy hue tints Jungkook’s cheeks as he mutters under his breath about annoying dragonborns.

The two of them continue their chore in silence.

It’s nice until it isn’t anymore because the discomfort flares anew the more the minutes then hour elapse.

Dahee, Jimin and Yoongi enter the house not long after Taehyung and Jungkook have finished their task.

Taehyung turns around and his gaze stumbles on Dahee who arches a brow at him. He nods toward the stairs, not needing to speak more for his mother to understand the request.

Taehyung and his mother step inside a vacant guest bedroom then on the balcony attached to it. He slumps on a chair and he draws a leg up as he stares at the night sky and dark forest ahead of him.

“What is troubling your mind, my son?” Dahee wonders as she settles on the second armchair.

“The Prince.”

“What about him?”

Taehyung plucks at a loose thread of the chair’s linen. “I’m worried it might become like Jimin. Like… You know how Jimin was when Minsoo and Elder Miseon brought me back. It was so bad, and we weren’t doing well at all for months."

“The fact that you worry about it convinces me that what you've gone through won’t elicit any worrisome aftermath,” Dahee says, her smile audible in her voice.

“I don’t know."

“What do you like about Jungkook?”

“Nothing,” is Taehyung’s reflexive response that earns him a tiny fireball on the cheek.

“*Son.*”

Taehyung petulantly groans and slouches on his seat. “Do I really have to answer that?”

“Yes. It's important."

Chin tucked in his palm that muffles his words, Taehyung glares at an innocent bush that rustles when an owl flies away. “His intelligence,” he starts, because he apparently has a list to declare and isn’t that fucking ridiculous. “His brattiness, even if it’s annoying. Kind of.” Dahee gives him a pointed look. “It depends. Whatever. I guess he’s pretty—”

“That he certainly is.”

“Pretty *entertaining* to be around. And he likes botany and the Arcane. So it’s nice to share those passions with someone else. I like how spiteful he can be, it's funny. I don’t know.”

“See? You have nothing to worry about, Taehyung.”

“Uh?”

“Your bond with Jungkook—”

“I don’t have any *bond* with him,” Taehyung snaps at the term. He grits his teeth and clenches his fist. He doesn't want to mention the man with the scent.

“The problem that had arisen between Jimin and you is that your relationship had been entirely narrowed down to your disappearance. This is why I had you fly, hunt, construct and more together, but also with other members of the family.”

“What does it have to do with the Prince?”

“Your bond with Jungkook has been forged long before the manor disaster. You are a blind fool, my son.”

“Mom…” Taehyung says through pursed lips and Dahee chuckles.

“I heard a fragment of your conversation with Jungkook earlier, and he had made an important distinction. He had said he can be away from you, but that he does not want to. Jimin had been the opposite of that back then: he *needed* you near him."

"But the Prince—"

"Jungkook simply seeks your presence, but will be perfectly well without it. Is it the same for you?”

Taehyung nods after a brief lull.

“You are not dependent on Jungkook, and neither is he of you. It is normal for you to want to be near Jungkook and vice versa. Among a plethora of other matters you both share, he can relate to your pain, something that can be so incredibly precious and rare to find.”

“I wasn’t seeking his presence before the manor. Not that I am now,” Taehyung quickly adds. “But, hypothetically, if I want to be near him only now, only after what happened at the manor, isn’t it bad?”

“Let’s say you want to spend time with Jungkook in the future, why would it be?”

“I don’t know…” Taehyung thinks back on the moments he has spent with Jungkook, the amusement he has felt and he says “Because he’s fun. I suppose he can be… He can be comforting? Kinda. But he understands me, and is patient with me. Or he wants to, at least. I think?”

“Was he like that before the manor?”

Taehyung peers at his mother. He nods, feeling strangely self-conscious.

“Was he fun before the manor?”

Taehyung nods again.

“My foolish son..." Dahee fondly combs a hand through Taehyung’s tousled bangs. “Do you understand now?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“I noticed how well you and Jungkook navigate together in spite of everything, and so since the very beginning.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You both tend to give the other what he wants and needs without realizing, especially Jungkook who is clearly more proficient when it comes to understanding his own emotions,” Dahee says, the jab prompting an offended huff out of Taehyung. She rests a hand on Taehyung’s wrist, her callous palm warm and grounding. “Moreover, between you and I,” she starts, a playful glint in her eyes, “aside from me, I haven’t known anyone who can handle you better than Jungkook does.”

“You and Minsoo are the only ones who can."

“Jungkook too. It has really stuck with me, his choice of ‘want’ over ‘can’. I would be heartbroken if Junhyun was not here, I can *be* without him. I simply choose not to. I want him by my side, as my friend, my soulmate, and the father of my sons.”

Taehyung’s eyes prickle at the last bit, and he knows that Jimin would have cried if he were to hear it. “I guess it makes sense."

“It does."

“It’s just that he keeps gyrating toward me, you know? He wasn’t before the manor clusterfuck.”

“Taehyung. I've raised you to be smarter than that.”

Taehyung clicks his tongue. “What does that even mean?”

“Jungkook has been ‘gyrating’ toward you for a long time, you’re only noticing it now."

“He has not.”

“He has. It’s easy to see that Jungkook longs for your affection and friendship since he has first arrived here. You may be silly and oblivious,” Dahee says, ignoring the embarrassed *‘Mom’* Taehyung mutters, “however I am not. Jungkook has a tendency to always shuffle closer to you, to pay a keen eye to what you say or do. The boy loves to have your attention on him."

“You’re speaking nonsense.”

Dahee heaves a long, forlorn sigh. “It’s no wonder you never had a boyfriend before.”

“What?”

“Your soul has been waiting for Jungkook.”

“Yeah. Alright.” Taehyung rises to his feet. Perhaps his mother’s insanity is contagious, and taking some distance will keep him safe. “You’ve actually lost your fucking mind.”

“Do you believe in soulmates?”

“No. Those don’t exist."

“They do. Sometimes arcanic, sometimes not."

"These are just tales."

"Perhaps. However, I do believe there is someone out there for us. A soul that will love and accept all of us.”

“If that's the case, my soulmate is my fucking bed. Goodnight.”

Taehyung barely dodges in time another tiny fireball.

“Taehyung,” Dahee calls and Taehyung pauses. “Jungkook has gone through a lot too, with his parents, Seungwon, and most likely his arcane as well. You must care for him more than he is with you. Understood?”

Taehyung nods, then he exits the room, his heart lighter and mood greatly improved.

He walks through the corridor and when he opens his bedroom’s door, he’s faced with the Prince who's comfortably loitering on the bed, leaned against the headboard, a lantern illuminating his form.

Taehyung frowns.

Jungkook glances at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Taehyung mutters. He promptly settles on the mattress and under the blankets. “You’re sleeping in Namjoon’s bed starting tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes. I know.”

Taehyung lays down on his back. He surveys Jungkook who’s sketching in the notebook Taehyung had gotten for him as a wedding gift.

Taehyung closes his eyes, hoping to fall asleep soon.

The pain worsens, hindering Taehyung’s somnolence. The scars of his torn wings have been growing more painful lately, and he doesn’t know if it’s due to his body that is still adjusting to the recent laceration of his wings, or if his healing arcane is still exhausted by the shackles' runes.

He rolls his shoulders, tossing and turning then staring at the ceiling.

He had gone flying earlier today and had shifted into his dragon self for the first time since the manor. The pain had been horrendous, but Taehyung had managed to fly for an hour without breaks. Perhaps he should have flown for less longer.

“What’s wrong?”

Taehyung hesitates before saying “It’s just my scars.”

“Your scars?”

“On my shoulders.”

Jungkook closes his book, resting it and the quill on the nightstand. After snuffing out the lantern, darkness falls in the bedroom, only disturbed by the muffled moonlight peeking through the curtains. Some rustling erupts as he nestles under the covers. “Can I ask something?”

“Ask straight away.”

“How come you still have scars?”

“I guess my wings being torn nearly every day for six months left permanent traces that even my arcane can’t heal."

“Is there something else this breath can’t heal?”

“Part of the pain.” Mangling, sometimes maddening when a simple motion of his arm feels as though his wings are being ripped again.

“In general or only for your wings?”

Taehyung’s fingers drum on his chest.

There’s something in the way Jungkook asks his questions. It’s matter-of-factly, rather than laced with guilt or upset like it can be when Taehyung talks about this with a member of his family. It’s grounding, where Taehyung feels free to speak of the nightmare without needing to worry about softening the truth.

Taehyung wonders if he can provide the same thing for Jungkook.

“The latter. I don’t know why but… You’ve seen what they did. The pain of my wings never fully healed. The opposite. It’s like it piled up and hasn’t left since then.”

“So you’re always in pain?”

“I’m used to it. I think the nightmare had been too much for my healing breath no matter how powerful it is. I had to constantly heal gashes, broken bones, torn scales for too long. It rarely stopped.”

“That makes sense.” Jungkook hums and rests his head on his clasped hands, laid on his side. “Did you ask the Elders about it?”

“I had back then but we found nothing. I don’t think there’s a solution for this.”

“Does it hurt when you fly?”

“I don’t think about the pain when I fly,” Taehyung says and it is so, *so nice*, how the answers easily flow out of his mouth, honest and freeing.

“I hope one day we can find a way to properly heal the pain. Maybe I can help with it, like you did to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“In the forest, when I was feeling the undead's pain.”

“What about it?”

“Your touches took the pain away.”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook, the latter already peering at him.

“The pain wasn’t as much anymore when you hugged me. I think you realized it too."

“I didn’t.”

“Then why did you hold me when you woke up after the others found us? I said I was in pain, and I didn’t need to speak more for you to know what I wanted." Jungkook nuzzles the bottom of his face in the crook of his elbow, his voice quiet. "I understand you, but you understand me too."

Taehyung hadn’t really thought about what he should do back then. He can’t say he had followed his instincts because they had been mute, muddled by the disorientation. His body had simply moved on its own. “Whatever."

“Constipated prick.”

“Fuck off.”

“Say,” Jungkook starts and he scoots closer to Taehyung, playfulness curling his mouth, “did you miss me when I was passed out?”

Taehyung snorts, loud and derisive. “Absolutely not.”

“Are you lying?”

Yes?

“No.”

“*I* missed this when you were sleeping.”

Taehyung hums. "Really?”

“Really. You were so… So quiet. And you can be quiet sometimes, yet if I talk to you, you pay attention to me. But when you were sleeping during the two weeks, you obviously couldn’t do any of that, so it was a bit lonely.”

“Well, the prick has awakened now.”

“Which one?” Jungkook even has the audacity to punctuate his question with a glance at Taehyung’s crotch.

“By the Elders,” Taehyung groans. He swivels around, his back to Jungkook, and he yanks on the blankets to fully cover himself with them.

Jungkook bursts into laughter. “See? I couldn’t tease you like that when you were sleeping. It was boring.”

Revna slides up the bed, her long body stretching between Taehyung and Jungkook.

“Are we still up for the date?”

“Not a date.”

“Yes or no, prick.”

“Yes. Sleep.”

“I have to shop with Jimin first.”

“We’ll leave in two days anyway, you’ve got time. Now shut up.”

“Goodnight, husband of mine.”

Jungkook’s laugh rings in the bedroom when Taehyung zaps him.

“Is everyone here?”

A chorus of *‘Yes’* answers Yoongi.

“We’re done with the making of the rings and bracelet. Hyuna has also helped.” Yoongi walks around the room, giving each person a ring along with a bracelet made of ink beads, one of the tiny balls holding a leaf in it while another is red. “The bracelet has several functions. First is a one time teleportation held in the leaf. All you need to do is visualize a place you’ve visited before then say the word ‘leave’. Second is the red bead that will flicker and warm up if someone around you is using any sort of appearance changing spell. The remainder of the black beads are all trackers.”

“What about the ring?”

“It’s an additional tracker as well as some sort of calling button,” Yoongi answers. “Can one of you press on one three times in a row?”

As expected, every person in the room promptly does as asked at the same time, eight gazes then drifting on Yoongi who gives them a stony look.

“*One* person.”

Taehyung presses on the small emerald adorning the ring, and Jungkook does as well. “He said just one."

“Exactly. So why did you press?” Jungkook retorts.

“You Vi—” Taehyung pauses when he feels a pinch where the ring is tightening around his middle finger.

“If one of us is in any danger, they can press on the ring’s gem three times within three seconds maximum to activate it. Once a ring has been activated, every other ring will pinch the finger until you deactivate them by pressing once on the gem,” Yoongi explains.

“This is absolutely brilliant, Yoongi,” Junhyun marvels with a bright grin.

“I helped him make them,” Jimin pridefully declares.

“With those precautions now, we’ll be much safer. We’ll immediately know if there is an imposter among us.”

A collective sigh of relief is heaved by the group crowding the living room.

“That is one less worry indeed,” Dahee says. “If by any horrible fortune one of us is taken away, locating them will be much easier.”

Taehyung watches as his mother peers at Junhyun, her and her mate exchanging a mute conversation as Dahee clasps Junhyun’s hand in hers.

“How is Hyuna?” Jungkook wonders, his head held low and fingers fiddling together.

“She’s healing well,” Hoseok reassures. “I’ve been visiting her every day. She’d like to see you soon, actually. Taehyung as well.”

Jungkook shakes his head. “Ah, no. This probably isn’t a good idea.”

Taehyung pinches Jungkook's side to grab his attention. “What the man with the scent has done to her isn’t your fault."

“And I really mean it when I say that she’s asking, or rather *demanding* to see you,” Hoseok adds. “She won’t stop raving about the ‘kind boy’.”

Jungkook peers at Hoseok, his lips pressed into a thin line. His gaze drifts on Taehyung a second later and he doesn’t need to speak for Taehyung to understand and relate to the guilt the Prince must be experiencing.

“Will you join me if I go see Hyuna?” Jungkook wonders, and Taehyung agrees. “Okay." He peers back at Hoseok. “You can tell her we’ll visit her soon.”

“Splendid! Now she’ll hopefully stop blabbering in my ear."

“You like her blabber though,” Seokjin intervenes.

Hoseok waves him off.

“If that’ll be all, I’ll head to bed. I’m exhausted,” Yoongi says through a yawn.

“Same.” Namjoon stands, trailing after Yoongi.

“Me too. Goodnight everyone.” Jungkook makes his way to the staircase. His head peeks out a moment later, and when Taehyung feels a pair of eyes on him, he meets his gaze. “Sleep well, husband of mine.”

Laughter erupts at Jungkook’s teasing.

“Choke," is all that Taehyung says. He dodges — *again* — his mother's fireball, however he doesn’t see the walnut shell Jungkook throws at him that bounces off his head.

Jungkook disappears in the staircase after exchanging a smile with Dahee.

Taehyung and Jimin haven’t spoken about what had happened at the manor, aside from what Taehyung had shared when he had woken up. They don’t need to. Instead, they decide to go on a flight together. They land on one of their favorite spots in Vanae where they lay down, their hands tightly entangled as they peer at the sky cleared of any clouds.

They remain there for a while, Jimin dozing off at some point, and it’s then that Taehyung shifts to his dragon self and flies them back home, Jimin sprawled in his human form on Taehyung’s neck.

Taehyung is successfully tired.

After taking a shower, he comes downstairs to say goodnight to his family, however when he sees his mother cuddling up against Junhyun who’s reading a book, along with Jimin loitering on the

carpet in front of the fireplace with Revna, Taehyung decides to stay.

The five of them bask in the tranquility, Dahee falling asleep on Junhyun's shoulder, Revna doing the same on Jimin's belly while Taehyung observes Vanae's forest and sky through the bay windows.

Taehyung is skimming through a book when the blare of a door swinging and slamming open against a wall disturbs the tranquility

Everyone's heads whirl toward the staircase where rapid footsteps echo.

"Jungkook, wai—"

Jungkook appears at the bottom of the stairs.

His eyes are wide, his chest heaving up and down. His pajama top is drenched in sweat, sticking to him like a second skin as his frantic eyes dart around the room. The tenseness in his jaw relaxes when his gaze settles on Taehyung.

Namjoon and Yoongi arrive behind Jungkook.

"Jung—"

"Storm," Jungkook rasps.

Taehyung unfolds his legs and closes the book that he deposits on the coffee table. He hoists himself from the chair to walk toward Jungkook who, the second Taehyung enters his vicinity, lifts his hands to grip onto Taehyung's arms, his gaze not straying away from Taehyung's face.

Taehyung turns Jungkook around. He places a hand between the Prince's shoulders to prompt him to move forward, leading them up the stairs.

They make their way down the corridor and once they reach the bathroom's door, Taehyung opens it to guide Jungkook inside, closing it behind them.

Jungkook swivels around. He grabs onto the hem of Taehyung's black shirt. "Can I see your chest?" He asks but doesn't appear to really see Taehyung.

Taehyung lifts his shirt.

Jungkook's fingers sprawl upon Taehyung's navel, their pulp probing at the skin and at the sides that he examines, the wedding ring cold. He exhales a trembling sigh as his shoulders slump. The upset furrowing his brows smooths the more his hands graze Taehyung's chest.

"That's eno—"

"You're fine..." Jungkook rasps.

Understanding washes over Taehyung.

He doesn't protest when Jungkook rests his forehead against his shoulder.

Jungkook inhales and exhales, the puffs of air warm where they cascade down Taehyung's collarbone.

Taehyung drops his shirt. "Of course I am." He doesn't push Jungkook away yet, allowing the Prince to draw the comfort he needs from him for now.

Jungkook's hands retract from beneath Taehyung's shirt as he steps back. "I'm sorry. I just— I had a nightmare and— And you died in it and then I died and you were stabbed in the chest and it was —" Jungkook's shoulders withdraw on themselves. "I'm used to gruesome things, but the nightmare was... Sorry. I'll go back with Namjoon and Yoongi. I just wanted to make sure you were fine because everything had felt… It felt real."

"Don't misunderstand what I said earlier." Taehyung lowers and tilts his head to the side, searching for Jungkook's gaze, and it's only when he meets it that he continues. "You can come to me if something happens. Don't let it be *just* me. That's all I meant, alright?"

"Okay... Thank you."

Taehyung doesn't know what to do next when a silence settles between them. Jungkook is still evidently distressed, wiping the sweat from his face with his sleeve, and he's trying to remove his pajama top but his fingers are clumsy.

Taehyung steps closer to hold the hem of the shirt and slide it off Jungkook's torso. "Do you want to take a shower?"

"I… Uhm… I don't know. Sorry. My mind's messy. Nightmares always— They always— I'm fine." Jungkook takes the shirt away from Taehyung to drop it inside the hamper. "Thinking is… It's complicated right now."

Taehyung's fingers curl around Jungkook's arm to pull him near the bathtub. He turns on the shower knob, making sure the temperature is warm enough. "Why don't you take a shower, hm? It'll help get rid of the restlessness."

"Okay." Jungkook breathes out, a sound that seems more relieved than annoyed.

"Come on," Taehyung says and tugs Jungkook near the step of the shower. "Careful when you get in. I'll go grab some clothes. Count down twice from sixty while I'm gone, yes?"

"I will, thank you." Jungkook sounds less frantic, more serene.

"Are you fine with being on your own for a bit?"

Jungkook peers at Taehyung with an indecipherable emotion. "Yes, thank you."

Taehyung exits the bathroom without looking back. He leaves the door ajar to make sure he can hear Jungkook if anything happens.

He descends to the living room.

Namjoon and Yoongi peer at him.

"Is he alright, Son?" Junhyun inquires, a worried frown etching his face.

“Nightmare,” Taehyung explains. “He needs some change,” he adds for Yoongi and Namjoon.

“I’ve got it.” Yoongi says to Namjoon. He follows Taehyung to the second floor then enters the bedroom he and Namjoon have been sleeping in. He rummages through one of the wardrobes there. “Thank you for helping him."

Taehyung shrugs, arms crossed over his chest as he waits in the doorway.

“We’re trying to help as well, but you bring him comfort only you can.”

“It’s whatever,” Taehyung mumbles, always uncomfortable around the warlock. He catches the bundle Yoongi tosses at him.

“I really don’t get what Jungkook sees in you."

“Neither do I in you,” Taehyung retorts and pivots to trudge toward the bathroom. “Fucking warlock.”

“Reptile brain.”

Taehyung’s mouth parts open in pure offense, and he doesn’t get to spill any insult before Yoongi climbs down the stairs, a smirk on his lips and a raven on his shoulder that cackles while staring at Taehyung.

Taehyung glares at the stupid bird.

A fog is filling the bathroom when Taehyung joins the Prince again, the stream of water splattering against the tiles.

“Taehyung?”

“Yeah.” Taehyung leaves the new pajamas on the sink countertop.

Jungkook pulls open the frosted glass door of the shower, his head popping out. “That was more than two minutes."

“Barely. I’m stepping out.”

“No. Can you— Can you stay here? I don’t want to be alone.”

Taehyung stares at the Prince for a brief lull before grabbing a wooden stool and turning around. He sits down in front of the entrance door and waits, an elbow propped on knee and chin tucked in his palm.

The glass door slides open a while later, trailed by wet footsteps and rustles of fabrics.

Taehyung is contemplating what figure to sculpt next when something soft touches his shoulder blades. His head darts to the side.

Jungkook is standing behind Taehyung, and he yanks his hand away. “Sorry.”

“My wings are fine,” Taehyung says and Jungkook nods. “Come on.” Taehyung rises to his feet.

He and Jungkook make their way inside the bedroom, however something still bothers the Prince if his skittish movements and evading gaze are any indication.

“What?”

“Hm?"

“What is it?”

“Nothing." There’s this veil that drapes over Jungkook, reminding Taehyung of how subdued and impassible Jungkook had been when he had first met him.

“Viper, if you’ve got something to say or ask, you can.”

“I don’t want to be annoying.”

Taehyung drops the pillow that he was fluffing out to march toward Jungkook. Jungkook walks backward until his back bumps against the door that clicks shut behind him when Taehyung braces himself against it with a hand.

“Look at me,” Taehyung demands and he even points at himself in case his request isn’t clear enough. “Do I look like a wretched queen?”

Jungkook’s lids flutter, confused. “No?”

“Was that a yes or no?”

“No,” Jungkook reiterates, more assured this time.

“That’s right. Now look at my eyes.” Taehyung has them flash in the golden hues they take in his dragon form. “Do they look like those of your coward of a father?”

“No,” Jungkook answers and his eyes have this open awe in them that they adorn whenever Taehyung is in his dragon form.

“Exactly. Meaning that I’m not Seohyung or Sungmin, meaning that you can ask whatever you want but the bread metaphor still applies, is that clear?”

Jungkook bobs his head, his figure relaxed.

“Now, asking again, what is it?”

Jungkook folds an arm over his navel, the other raising so that his hand covers his mouth as he speaks. “I’m cold.”

“And?”

“There’s this sweater you wear sometimes. It looks really comfy and warm...” Jungkook's words are muffled so low that Taehyung has to strain his ears to listen.

Taehyung levels Jungkook with an unimpressed stare. “You want to wear it."

“Yes."

Taehyung rolls his eyes.

Jungkook smacks his arm. “You’re the one who asked.”

“Which one is it?” Taehyung guesses that he can sacrifice one sweater amidst the plethora that he owns.

“The light gray one, in ribbed wool."

Taehyung cocks his head toward the bed. “Come on, lay down."

Jungkook does, climbing on the mattress then making himself comfortable under the blankets.

Rummaging through his former closet to pluck the sweater is easy. Grabbing it and closing the wardrobe isn’t difficult either. It doesn't require thinking. Giving the sweater to Jungkook is also simple: he tosses it on the bed. He even makes a storm globe because he remembers how it had helped the Prince during their wedding night.

Taehyung collides with a wall after that. His hands clench. His frustration swells the more he remains still.

What is he supposed to do next?

Taehyung doesn't know what the prince needs. He doesn't *know* Jungkook, after all.

What is he doing?

Taehyung mutters something about water, an excuse to be away from the Prince.

His parents, Jimin, Namjoon and Yoongi are all discussing together, their voices hushed as Taehyung storms inside the kitchen.

Taehyung ignores their inquisitive looks that only serve to worsen his sudden sullen mood.

Being a chaos dragon comes with its downsides.

First is the amount of breaths that is near impossible to ever fully control. Then there’s the unstable aspect of the dragonborn’s arcane: an untamed beast Taehyung has yet to master, one whose explosiveness is more often than not reflected in the dragonborn themselves.

Even if every dragon is their own person, archetypes still exist that are more or less present: fire dragons can have a fiery personality; water or nature dragons are usually calm and level-headed; while healing dragons tend to be altruistic empaths. Minsoo is a great example of how those standards can fall flat.

In Taehyung’s case, he unfortunately falls into the archetype of his draconic heritage: volatile and temperamental. Impatient and unstable. *Chaos.* Albeit more or less bridled, as he tries his damnedest to better control his arcane and temper. However his flaws still subsist, and sometimes rear their ugly heads when he least needs it.

Taehyung grabs a pot of water then two tea bags. He'll have to visit his grandfather for the tea infusion that aids him fall asleep. Hopefully they’ll help the Prince too.

As he waits for the beverage to be made, he scours through the kitchen cupboards.

He doesn't know what he's looking for, which does not help his ever growing irritation, but he still continues to look, closing a door one after another. He halts when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

“What is wrong, Son?”

“I have no fucking clue of what I’m doing."

“With Jungkook?” Dahee wonders, and how *the fuck* does she know this is about the Prince?

Taehyung nods after a beat of silence, the motion curt. “It’s easy with you because you’re family. He isn’t.”

“It would be easy with him too if you treated him like us.”

“No. He is *not* my family. He’s not part of my people either. I—I don’t know what he is to me.”

“Jungkook is your husband. Perhaps it could be a newfound category."

“Yeah, well, that new category is fucking annoying. How am I supposed to know what to do with this… This nonsense? I don’t do new relationships of any kind because I know I’ll end up fucking everything up even if I try not to, which is whatever at this point, really. I don't care. But the Prince —” Taehyung’s frustration toward himself grows bitter. He feels like a child again, unable to navigate a newfound friendship no matter how hard he'd try. “I want— I want to try. With the Prince. I think I... I think I want to, ‘cause not every human is like Do— Like *him*, right? Jungkook isn’t.”

“Not every human is like Dohyun, my son. Far from it."

“So. Yeah. I don’t know what I’m doing.” Taehyung grabs the jar of honey to drip some of it in the cup of tea he has made for Jungkook. “I’ve messed it up since the beginning with him, when Jungkook already has his own problems to deal with because of his hellish parents. I had my reasons with my… With *my* trauma,” Taehyung says, and the word has always felt odd on his tongue, disconcerting, because he used to believe that what he had gone through had never been *that* bad.

He sometimes still does, like he is right now when the guilt and remorse of how he has treated Jungkook flares up within him.

After all, the man with the scent would still tend to Taehyung, right? He’d make sure Taehyung is comfortable. He'd give Taehyung anything he’d want aside from freedom and any respite from the laceration of his wings. So Taehyung’s scorn toward Jungkook was never justified or reasonable.

“Never undermine the horror of the nightmare you have gone through,” Dahee says and tears Taehyung away from the spiral he has been descending into. “The way you were with Jungkook at first was understandable, Taehyung. It was *not* justified, because it was not right in *any* way, however you had your reasons to be wary. You were terrified."

Taehyung stares at the kitchen counter, frozen in place.

He had never realized this.

He *had* been terrified of allowing a human to invade his home, his space and his land. He had been afraid of Jungkook potentially betraying Taehyung like Jongsuk had. Of Jungkook perhaps being worse than the man with the scent that had torn Taehyung apart so many times.

Taehyung had been so damn terrified, and the understanding is as dizzying as it is relieving.

“You had never realized..."

“I… Yeah."

“Are you still scared of Jungkook?”

“I’m not.” Taehyung's honesty is rewarded by a peck on his temple.

“You’re doing well, Taehyung. You have no reason to be overthinking so intensely.”

“I’m not overthinking anything. I’m annoyed.”

“And why are you annoyed?”

“Because I don’t know what I’m doing. I told you already."

“It’s unusual to see you insecure like this.”

“Please,” Taehyung scoffs and twirls the spoon to mix the tea and honey together. “I’m not insecure.”

“Then why are you doubting yourself so much? You’re willing to help Jungkook and make amends, which is more than enough at present. You’re trying, Taehyung. It counts as a great deal, and I’m certain Jungkook appreciates it. You will have to do better in the future, and learn how to properly care for Jungkook, however there is no rush in that. Jungkook himself does not seem hurried.”

Taehyung’s jaw clenches as he throws two sugars in his own cup of tea. “Whatever.”

“You forgot to add some sugar in Jungkook’s."

“No, I didn’t," Taehyung snips. "He prefers honey instead of sugar.”

Dahee snickers and ruffles Taehyung’s hair. “Oblivious boy."

Taehyung glares at his mother as she sashays toward the living room. He grabs some dark chocolate that he breaks into pieces and fills a bowl with, something Junhyun used to do for Taehyung when he’d be upset. Taehyung flicks a square of the dark chocolate in his mouth, and after grabbing the cups of tea, he climbs up the stairs.

He finds the Prince at the same place he had left him, except that this time Jungkook’s form is swathed by the gray sweater Taehyung has lent to him. Revna is draped over Jungkook’s shoulders, her snout inside the storm globe. She jerks away a second later when lightning erupts in the globe, shaking her head with a sneeze.

Jungkook chuckles. He peers at Taehyung and takes the cup Taehyung hands him. “Thank you."

Taehyung wordlessly leaves the bowl of chocolate on the bed.

“Is everything okay?”

“Peachy.”

Taehyung munches on some chocolate again before stepping away from Jungkook to open the dresser. His hands are full of his old carving kit a few minutes later, the tools battered, but effective enough for some casual carving. He rips a piece of wood from the drawer’s door and rather than sitting on the bed, he settles against the glass door of the bay window.

“I can leave if it bothers you that I’m here.”

“Did I say that?”

“No, but you’re giving me mixed signals."

“Just… Drink your tea. I don’t want to talk.”

“Have I done something wrong?”

“No.” Taehyung grabs the bent gouge to start nipping at the piece of wood.

“Then what is it?”

“I just said that I don’t want to talk."

“Are we going back to square one so quickly?”

“I’m not very patient right now, Viper.” Taehyung should shut up or leave, yet he stays there and continues to respond. “Don’t push it.”

“Not a single relationship will last or grow if only one of them is pulling closer while the other is constantly pushing away."

It makes sense. It does. However Taehyung discards the remark. "You're a fucking mind healer now?"

“Alright.” Jungkook lifts the blankets off himself. He climbs down the bed, the pit-a-pat of his slipper the only sound in the stiff stillness.

Taehyung watches as Jungkook opens the door and exits the bedroom.

Taehyung waits, his gaze born into the closed door.

He waits some more.

He expects Jungkook to come back inside with a disgruntled pout, but it never happens.

“Fuck.” Taehyung presses the heel of his palms against his eyes. “What the fuck is wrong with me...”

An hour trickles by, or so Taehyung thinks. He still hasn’t moved, and neither has the door.

The remorse is worse than before, and he only has himself to blame for it.

He should have just left on his own first. It would have saved the Prince from Taehyung's temper that can undeservedly blast outward. Yet he had stayed, and he's not sure why. Perhaps it's because he had expected the Prince to push a little more.

Taehyung leaves his carving tools on the ground to stand and make his way downstairs.

His and Jungkook's gaze bump together before Jungkook looks away to smile at Junhyun.

Jimin whistles, probably sensing the — one-sided? — tension between Taehyung and Jungkook. "Damn. What happened?"

"You should ask him," Jungkook quips without an ounce of anger, or at least none that Taehyung can detect.

"I told you I didn't want to talk but you kept going." Taehyung grabs his shoes and fastens them on. "If you can't handle the results of pushing me when I'm already obviously annoyed, then don't fucking push."

Jungkook chuckles, an arm resting atop the backrest of the armchair he's settled in. He crosses a leg over the other, supporting his head against the back of his hand as he watches Taehyung. "I can handle you just fine," he says with so much nonchalance.

Taehyung doesn't linger, biting back an undeserved retort as he leaves the house.

He turns to his dragon self and flies off into the night.

It rarely snows in Vanae, however some minuscule, white snowflakes fall upon Taehyung's back and wings, melting the moment they come into contact with the warm skin.

Then, Taehyung falls into a strange pattern.

It's as though some sort of elastic band is dragging him back inside the house that he cannot, for the life of him, sunder. Taehyung doesn't want to be near anyone, whether it be his family or the Prince. He wants to cool down first, however he continues to come back inside his parents' house.

It starts because Taehyung has the sudden need to grab his winter cloak in case he wants to shift back to human while outside.

Later on he walks to the kitchen to grab some chocolate then turns to dragon and departs again, only to come back ten minutes later to drink from his cup of tea that he leaves on the kitchen counter. It'd be more efficient if he were to take the stupid fucking cup with him, but he doesn't. Instead, he leaves it on the counter, flies away, comes back, drinks some of the tea, then leaves once more.

Thankfully, the people in the living room aren't paying attention to Taehyung's ridiculous antics.

The eighth time Taehyung steps in the house, he stays.

He takes off his shoes and cloak, and he sits on a stool at the kitchen island, his back to the rest of the room. He heats up his cup of tea, sipping what's left of it.

He peers over his shoulder at the living room.

His and Jungkook's gaze meet.

Taehyung averts his own first.

Footsteps drag behind him. He recognizes the Prince's walk, confirmed when Jungkook pauses in front of him on the other side of the kitchen island.

"You've calmed down." Jungkook comments as he pours himself another cup of the beverage. "You'll tell me what's wrong or you really don't want to?"

Taehyung's nails drum on the counter's surface, his eyes cast low on his wedding ring.

He doesn't reply.

"I'll say one last thing," Jungkook starts and Taehyung peers up at him, "if you keep pushing me away without ever pulling me in, I'll stop trying, Taehyung."

Taehyung pretends that the flash of hurt in him is caused by the pain in his shoulders. It's easier like that.

"I don't want to, but I deserve better than what you've been giving me. Since I arrived in Vanae, I've been patient and understanding with you. I still want to be, but relationships go both ways. It can't just be one person nurturing it." Jungkook does not wait for a response. He marches out of the kitchen to plop back on the armchair.

The conversation resumes.

Taehyung fiddles with the golden band of his wedding ring. The same tug he had felt in the forest occurs once more. It wrings inside him, and where it had been painless back then, here it uncomfortably aches in his chest.

The stool scrapes across the floor when Taehyung pushes himself off the counter

The tug guides him toward Jungkook, and so Taehyung follows it.

He stops in front of the Prince to grab his wrist, his hold loose in case Jungkook doesn't want to trail after. However Jungkook allows himself to be led upstairs, the two of them soon entering Taehyung's former bedroom.

"When I said you should pull me in, I didn't necessarily mean literally so. Or now."

A flicker of amusement rises in Taehyung as he releases Jungkook's wrist. "Shut up."

"I'm not complaining though," Jungkook says with a smile and he leans against the door, his hands sliding behind his back.

Taehyung retrieves his carving tool and the piece of wood to settle on his bed. "You can come sit."

"I don't feel like it."

It stings.

Taehyung's lips pinch into a frown.

He wonders if the Prince feels the same whenever Taehyung pushes him away.

He peers at Jungkook who's already looking back at him. The Prince doesn't seem resentful. Now that Taehyung thinks about it, the Prince hasn't looked irritated once since Taehyung's temper had flared up. "Why aren't you angry?"

"Hm? At you?" Jungkook asks and Taehyung nods. "I meant it when I said I can handle you," Jungkook chuckles.

"You shouldn't have to."

"Perhaps, but I can make my own choices. Have you considered that I care about you? Even when you're being a prick? That I *choose* to care? To help?"

Taehyung's fingers still around his carving tools.

"And I don't mean endure your issues, as you call them."

"I'll always have a temper, Viper. That's not something that is ever gonna be erased from me."

"I know it'll stay. It's part of who you are to some extent. However it doesn't mean you can't teach others how to handle your draconic heritage better, something that I'm certain you've been working on yourself since you were a child."

Taehyung's gaze jumps from Jungkook's to land on the scar on the cheek before it finds its way back on Jungkook's eyes, only to evade it once more.

Taehyung doesn't know how much time passes, a minute or two at most, but he eventually says "I'm sorry."

Jungkook moves.

He pushes himself from the closed door to climb on the mattress and sit in front of Taehyung. "Apologies accepted."

There's more that Taehyung wants to say but the words are stuck in his throat.

"I'm sorry for pushing you to talk. You didn't want to, and I should have respected that. I got a little… A little selfish."

"Selfish?"

"I was worried, that's all."

"About?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Taehyung nods. "Don't apologize for that."

"Why?"

"Because you've got nothing to apologize for."

“I’m not following."

Taehyung doesn’t need to watch him to know that the Prince’s head is tilted to the side in confusion.

“Because I didn’t mind. You pushing. I think I— It’s nice that someone pushes. Or wants to in the first place. I’m not used to that.”

“The thing is, you have to *clearly* tell me when I push too much. I mean it, Taehyung.” Jungkook presses, his gaze finding Taehyung’s. “Because if you don’t, then it’ll lead to an argument that can be avoided if you, you know, communicate like an adult.”

“Fuck off."

Jungkook folds his leg under him and he tucks his hands beneath his shins as he lightly rocks from side to side. “I’d like it if you push with me too, and if you pull me in more often…” A certain coyness quietens his voice. “I know I rarely talk about my own, uh, problems with Amaris’ rulers, or Seungwon. Because I don’t want to, and I’m happy that you’re respecting this. But… You can push with me. I think I need that sometimes too.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

The frustration lessens a little more when Jungkook’s lips curve into a gentle smile. The guilt still lingers, but it ebbs away more and more.

“Is taking care of me what prompted your bad mood?”

“I wasn’t doing any of that.”

“*Taehyung.*”

Taehyung heaves a sigh. “I don’t know, Viper.”

“You don’t have to do anything if it bothers you that much. I know I can be—”

Taehyung’s head lifts when Jungkook falls mute. “What.”

“You don’t have to help me because you think you owe me a debt."

“I’m not.”

“Then why did you help me earlier?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me because if the only reason why you’re caring for me is out of remorse, stop. I want to be close to you because you want it too, not because you feel like you *have* to.”

“I know it’ll sound childish, but I rarely do things that I don’t want to."

“Then… With my nightmare, you wanted to ta— I mean, help me. You wanted to help me? Genuinely so?”

"Yeah," Taehyung says. Confesses, really.

A flush tints Jungkook’s cheeks, and its appearance is confusing as it often is.

Taehyung’s eyes narrow. “Why are you blushing?”

Jungkook’s hands fly to his face. “You’re not supposed to be pointing out these kinds of things, you prick.”

“That doesn’t answer me.”

“Shut up.” Jungkook peeks through his fingers. “And why were you annoyed earlier?”

“Because I don’t know what I’m doing."

Jungkook lowers his hands. “With me?”

Taehyung doesn’t say anything, neither confirming or denying, but this is apparently all the answer Jungkook needs.

“Taehyung, were you… Oh,” Jungkook breathes out. His eyes lighten with an understanding that is softened by a small smile. “You’re an idiot.”

“So you’ve said,” Taehyung dismisses and goes back to his sculpture. He can still feel Jungkook's eyes on him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*. All… soft.”

“I’m not looking at you all soft,” Jungkook mutters through pursed lips.

"Sure." Taehyung continues to sculpt the head of the turtle that is slowly taking shape, meticulous when he begins to work on the eyes.

“You were doing great with me."

Taehyung emits a non-committal sound.

“When I came downstairs after my nightmare, and how you... Helped me.” Jungkook blushes. *Again.* And for some reason a heat crawls up Taehyung’s neck as well in reaction.

“Can you stop blushing already."

“I’m not blushing.”

“Yes you are.”

“You’re blushing too.”

“I’m not.”

“Your cheeks are pink.”

“And yours are fucking beet red, where do we go from here?”

Jungkook bursts into laughter. “I’m just happy." He tucks a strand of hair behind his ear and he tugs on the sleeve of Taehyung’s sweater he’s wearing, lifting a hand to conceal his bunny smile. “You’re doing great with me. You gave me exactly what I needed earlier. You should trust yourself more.”

Taehyung’s gaze settles on Jungkook, dancing between Jungkook’s eyes that have this softness in them punctuated by the cheeks that bunch up around another smile.

The frustration completely vanishes. Taehyung blinks, astray, and rather than questioning why he’s suddenly feeling a lot better, he focuses his attention on the piece of wood he’s carving.

“I just unraveled a new bow.”

“Of what?”

“Who knows,” Jungkook cheekily replies and deftly dodges the zap of lightning aimed at his forehead.

Jungkook squirms under the blankets, snatching two pillows to rest his head on. He watches Taehyung work on the sculpture and plays with the flakes of wood that fall on Taehyung’s leg. Taehyung bats his fingers away.

“Mean,” Jungkook huffs but retracts his hand. “Is there more chocolate? The others ate everything.”

“Downstairs. You didn’t eat at dinner?” Taehyung had been asleep at the time.

“I did, but I’d never say no to chocolate.”

Taehyung hums.

He forgot his cup of tea, he muses.

Taehyung finds himself in the kitchen less than a minute later, and if he takes some squares of chocolate, it’s only because it had been right there — although Taehyung *had* to look for another tablet in the cupboards yet could find none, meaning that he had to check in the forsaken basement and had to then break the tablet into a bowl.

But Jungkook is none the wiser.

The two of them are now lounging on Taehyung’s mattress, munching on their snack.

A matter nags at the back of Taehyung’s head.

“You’re doing great too,” Taehyung blurts out before he can renege the words, “but if sometimes you don’t, you can come to me. I’ll listen whenever you’re ready to talk about what happened to you. And if you never want to, that’s alright too.”

“Thank you... I—”

“You’re not a burden,” Taehyung adds, because there’s something in the way that Jungkook *always* steers conversations away from him, how overly conscious he is to not aggravate anyone with his own problems or himself as a whole. “I don’t know what kind of bullshit Seohyung and Sungmin may have said to you, but you’re not a burden. Your existence isn’t. I… I’m sorry if I made you feel this way.”

A stillness falls in the bedroom.

Jungkook does not reply, and so Taehyung resumes his carving.

Not much time passes before a muffled sniffle disturbs the silence.

Taehyung peers down.

The bottom of Jungkook’s face is buried in the crook of his elbows, his face knitted as tears slide past the bridge of his nose to disappear in the pillow. His shoulders are shaking yet he’s so *quiet*, not a single sound falling from his lips.

Jungkook’s alarmed gaze darts up on Taehyung, as if caught doing something he should not.

Jungkook scrambles to wipe his face and straightens up. “Sorry.” He pulls the covers off himself, a moment away from bolting out, however Taehyung stops him.

“It’s fine.”

“No. It’s not, it’s— I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to break down like that, I know it’s annoying but—”

Taehyung frowns. “It’s not annoying.”

“I just need some fresh air.” Jungkook wrenches his wrist from Taehyung’s clasp but Taehyung holds him back again.

“*Jungkook.*”

Jungkook looks taken aback when his head swivels toward Taehyung, his eyes misty.

“It’s fine." Jungkook looks so uncertain and lost, and Taehyung doesn’t know what to do. “Have I said something wrong?”

“No,” Jungkook croaks out and his mouth clicks shut to swallow the sob that nearly escapes him. “M’sorry.”

“Then… Are you happy?” A shot in the dark. Yet when Jungkook lightly nods, understanding slowly dawns on Taehyung. “Because I said you’re not a burden? Is this why?”

Jungkook simply nods again.

A new found ire bubbles within Taehyung. The arcane in his breath pouch simmers with this impulsive urge to lash out on two specific people.

“What do you want?”

“Nothing.” Jungkook shuffles away from Taehyung on the bed but Taehyung follows after him, not relenting his light grasp around Jungkook’s forearm.

“What do you want?”

“It doesn’t matter. It *doesn’t* matter. I know it doesn’t. I’m fine, I—”

“Of course it matters. Why wouldn’t it?”

“Why would it matter? *Why?”* Jungkook says this with a shrug, and it almost sounds like a plea. “There’s so much that I want, Taehyung, but I don’t— I shouldn’t have them, ‘cause… I shouldn’t. And that’s okay. M’fine.”

“Why shouldn’t you have them?”

An *‘I don’t know’* is the last thing Jungkook says before breaking into tears, but even then he’s still quiet, and Taehyung can’t help but question if Jungkook has always been forced to repress something as natural as crying.

Jungkook mumbles some apologies, and something about how his nightmare has rendered him more sensitive, that he’s usually not like that, his words intersected by some more *‘I’ll leave’* and *‘I’m sorry ’*, but Taehyung ignores them.

Taehyung settles against the headboard and pillows. He tries to Jungkook with him, tugging on his arm, and Jungkook complies to the request when Taehyung pulls a second time. Jungkook looks disoriented as he peers at Taehyung through his tears, and so Taehyung guides him.

“Come here,” Taehyung whispers as one of his hands finds its home on Jungkook’s waist to pull him closer. Jungkook understands the hushed demand as he straddles Taehyung’s laps, his arms curling around Taehyung’s back. Taehyung supposes that this can help. He doesn’t know what else to do.

“I’m sorry,” Jungkook cries on Taehyung’s shoulder, pressing their chests flush. “I don’t like being like this.”

“Like what?”

“Talking about my issues, what Seohyung and Seungwon did to me. I don’t like it. It’s… It scares me, ‘cause I don’t want to be annoying, or a worse burden than I am. Makes me feel so vulnerable.” Jungkook pauses when his breath hitches.

Taehyung responds to the tug in his chest, holding Jungkook tighter against him. “Do you want me to get Namjoon or Yoongi?”

Jungkook shakes his head, the grip of his fingers tightening on the back of Taehyung’s shirt.

“Are you alright being like this with me?”

“I usually hate it, but it’s okay here. I’m just… I’m sorry for being selfish,” Jungkook mumbles and pushes himself off Taehyung. “I won’t bother you again with this, I promise. Thank you for—”

Taehyung doesn’t let Jungkook move any farther as he cradles Jungkook’s face, uncaring of the tears that wet his thumbs when he brushes them on the apple of the cheeks. “You’re not a burden.”

Jungkook shakes his head, his hands balled into fists on his lap and trembling lips pressed shut.

Dahee's earlier remark flashes in Taehyung's mind.

Taehyung had never really stopped to properly take into consideration what Jungkook may have gone through in his life. Jungkook puts up this strong yet lighthearted front, reminding everyone of how he can handle anything that is thrown at him. Taehyung has no doubt that Jungkook can, and that the Prince enjoys it to some extent.

However Jungkook, who always shows an endless empathy for others, does not seem to grant himself such kindness.

"You're not a burden, Viper. You're not a burden to anyone, whether to your people, your family or mine."

"What about you?" Jungkook's question is coy. *Ashamed.*

"You're not a burden to me either. Do you believe me?"

"I want to, but I can't, I'm sor—"

"You'll believe it one day, yeah? You're not a burden. At all."

"Thank you, 'think I needed to hear that a little. S'ry." Jungkook tries to talk some more but his mute cries hinder his words, and Taehyung embraces him once more.

It takes a bit of maneuvering, however Taehyung eventually manages to yank the blanket from under them to drape it over their forms. He bundles Jungkook with the comforter and, once satisfied, he shuffles lower down on the mattress, laying on his back with Jungkook who slackens above Taehyung.

"Is this alright?"

"More than alright," Jungkook croaks out, his tears warm where they fall on Taehyung's shoulder. Jungkook moves to lay a bit better. He stretches his legs, one of them between Taehyung's, but he never breaks the hug, remaining warm and heavy atop Taehyung.

It's comforting, even if Taehyung isn't the one needing it right now.

Jungkook nuzzles his face in the dip of Taehyung's neck as he tucks himself closer. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me for that."

"Is this really okay?"

"It is."

"Okay."

"You're not a burden."

Jungkook makes a soft sound. "Okay… Thank you."

“Do you believe me?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you want to?”

“Mhm, I do.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Is it?”

“It is, Jungkook.”

Jungkook sniffles and heaves a sigh. “I like when you say my name.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Viper.”

Jungkook emits a wet chuckle. “Do you—”

Taehyung waits, but when it becomes clear that Jungkook won’t say more, he says “What is it?”

“Do you hate helping me?”

“I don’t.”

“Do you dislike it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay.”

"Relationships go both ways. It can’t just be one person nurturing it."

Taehyung's admission is more of a confession, hushed to and for Jungkook only.

“I think I can learn to like it.”

Jungkook sighs, a warm puff of hair against Taehyung's skin, trailed by the graze of a nose, then lips. A shiver blooms in Jungkook, starting where Taehyung’s fingers bump on Jungkook's waist, and walking a pebbled path up to the chest and nape.

“Are you cold?” Taehyung wonders, already shuffling through his breaths to slot on the fire one.

“I’m not. Is it okay if— Can you... Can you hold me a little tighter? Please? Just for a little bit, then I’ll move.”

Taehyung pushes Jungkook away from him. He turns to lay on his right side and he’s immediately confronted by the flash of hurt that washes over Jungkook and pinches his face. “Hey, no—”

“I’ll—”

“No. *No.* Everything’s fine,” Taehyung shushes Jungkook and reduces the distance between them. “I was just moving us.”

Taehyung doesn’t let Jungkook dissolve into this pit of insecurity Taehyung has accidentally unearthed tonight. Instead, he wraps his arms around Jungkook, drawing him closer until not a hair's breadth subsists between them. Jungkook’s fingers find their place on Taehyung’s back, while Taehyung’s hand cups Jungkook’s waist, the other one cradling the nape.

Taehyung presses his chin atop Jungkook’s crown as the latter emits a small hum.

“Comfortable?”

“Very. And warm." Jungkook fidgets with Taehyung's shirt. “Can I keep your sweater?”

“Yeah, it’s yours.”

“Is it really fine if I keep it?”

“Yeah. You're not a burden. Do you believe me?”

“I don’t.”

“You will one day.”

Jungkook withdraws from the embrace to tilt his head back.

Their gazes find each other, as they tend to.

The bedroom is only lightened by the moonlight that seeps through the bay windows, however it’s enough for Taehyung to see Jungkook’s face: the puffy eyes, the red nose, or the faint sheen on the cheeks and lids.

Then there’s how Jungkook looks at Taehyung.

Taehyung may struggle with reading people, however the way Jungkook watches him is easy to grasp: it’s full of gratitude and contentment, as though Jungkook had been waiting for someone to tell him that everything will be fine.

Taehyung tucks Jungkook’s head against his chest, the Prince’s eyes and candor in them overwhelming.

“Jungkook?! You’re ready?!”

“Yes!”

Jungkook runs down the stairs, slinging the sleeves of his winter coat over his arms. He had to — regrettably — swap the sweater Taehyung had given him in favor of a more appropriate attire for today’s outing. The sweater is especially warm and cozy. It smells so, *so good*, of a smoky storm that envelops Jungkook in a cocoon of comfort like Taehyung had last night, and he doesn’t want to dirty it by going outside with it.

Taehyung is cooking with his father on the kitchen island, the two of them laughing over God knows what.

Jungkook walks toward them, his own lips curling at the grin Taehyung aims at his father. The sleeves of Taehyung’s black shirt are pulled up to his elbows, displaying the strong forearms, the sparse scars marring the skin, and the few veins that shift when Taehyung slices a potato.

Because the dragonborn can make cutting a potato an attractive endeavor, it seems.

Or perhaps Jungkook is utterly biased, however in his defense, Taehyung’s dark strands are pushed back by the beige, cotton headband he wears from time to time to keep his hair out of the way. So Jungkook has the chance to freely witness the dragonborn’s beauty.

Jungkook doesn’t mean to stare. Or rather, he doesn’t mean to stare so blatantly, but he can’t help it.

Taehyung is really, *really* handsome.

He’s even more beautiful when his boxy smile takes over his face as it currently is while chatting with Junhyun.

Jungkook’s thoughts trace back to this morning, on how he had woken up in the same bed as Taehyung. Taehyung had still been fast asleep.

The muffled sunlight of the bay windows bathing the room had been enough for Jungkook to admire the curves of Taehyung’s face, his features smoothed from any frown and freed from the hair fanned over the pillow. It may have been a little creepy, for Jungkook to stare at his oblivious husband, but his sleepy mind had not cared much, too busy basking in the peacefulness the quiet morning had enveloped him with, a dichotomy to the turmoil of the night before.

Jungkook hates talking about his past, Seohyung or Seungwon, because he knows it'll lead to him craving for something that won’t be given.

Jungkook had not expected himself to break down after hearing those new, foreign words. What he had anticipated less had been for Taehyung to take care of Jungkook who tries his best to never request anything, so as to not burden anyone with his endless greed.

Taehyung hadn't minded, however.

Taehyung had been so…

So *good* to Jungkook last night. So patient, stubborn and caring.

Jungkook does not recall much of when he and Taehyung had been running away through the forest. The pain had overtaken everything else. However he remembers Taehyung’s fleeting grazes

of a hand, or the touches that would last longer when he'd hold Jungkook in his arms.

The only affection Jungkook has ever been given has been from Yoongi and Namjoon. Now, Jimin is part of those people, Dahee as well and Junhyun too, Hoseok and Seokjin a step away from joining them. So Jungkook muses.

And yearns, in spite of how affectionately Taehyung had held him last night.

Jungkook can't help but wonder if Taehyung will grant him the one thing Jungkook doesn't deserve much, yet desires more than anything else.

It's agonizing, wanting to be loved so much, yet knowing no one will.

Jungkook wants to be cradled and cherished, reassured and encouraged; have his worries be kissed away, his fears shushed by tender touches. And more. *So much more.* Because Jungkook is too avid, starving for a love that won't ever be fulfilled.

Taehyung somewhat had yesterday, even if fleetingly.

However Jungkook should be content with what he currently has, lest his greed consumes him whole

"What are you making?" Jungkook asks, shoving down the voice nagging at the back of his head.

"We're preparing the barbecue for tonight," Junhyun grins. "You will have leftovers for your date with Taehyung tomorrow."

Taehyung heaves a deep sigh. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. Junhyun peers at Jungkook and when he winks at him, Jungkook bites back a chuckle.

Jungkook shuffles near Taehyung. Not too close, both to not breach Taehyung's boundaries, but also because he doesn't want to be overbearing. He has asked for enough already last night. "Are there any sweet potatoes?"

Taehyung makes a vague motion toward a pot on the kitchen counter. "Already prepared."

The ruby necklace is slung around Taehyung's neck for the weekly 25 minutes while Revna is curled on a stool next to him, her head peeking out to sniff at the food. Jungkook watches as she loosely curls once around Taehyung's wrist to peer up at him. Her shenanigans work because Taehyung chops a piece of potato that he wordlessly feeds to her.

"Are those your favorite type?" Junhyun wonders.

"They are," Jungkook smiles. "I could eat roasted sweet potatoes every day."

"It's no wonder Taehyung had been so adamant about bringing some for tonight's fare," Junhyun nods.

Taehyung glares at his father and plants the knife in the cutting board to grab a bowl. "First of all, I wasn't adamant about anything. Second of all, they're my favorite too."

"Of course, Son."

Jungkook chuckles, but sensing that Taehyung's temper may be on the verge of igniting, he steers the conversation far from the teasing. "I'm going out with Jimin."

Taehyung peers at Jungkook. "Why are you telling me?"

It's truly no wonder that Taehyung has such a hard time making, let alone maintaining, close relationships.

He has a certain manner of speaking, sentences that he phrases in a way that may come off as aggressive or confrontational even if they aren't. Akin to now, but Jungkook can tell that Taehyung's question is born from a genuine confusion rather than an accusation.

So Jungkook's head tilts to the side, also confused. "I don't know."

Taehyung shakes his head, focusing back on his task. "Enjoy, I guess. If you can, that is."

"I heard that!" Jimin chirps.

Taehyung smiles and Jungkook does too.

"Do you need anything?"

"I'm good."

"Alright." Jungkook turns around to join Jimin at the entrance doors.

"Taehyung. You must *stop* feeding pieces of potatoes to Revna. I do not want her to grow a habit of begging for food when we cook," Dahee scolds from the living room.

"I gave her one piece," Taehyung retorts.

"You mean ten of them."

Taehyung, like the five years old that he can be, pointedly looks at his mother when he cuts another piece of potato and feeds it to Revna.

"You're grounded," Dahee states with a scowl but it's rendered null by the evident amusement that paints her lips.

"I'm a grown ass man, you can't ground me anymore."

"Shall we try?"

Taehyung pouts at his mother.

Jungkook snickers.

"Be safe," Taehyung says while peering at Jimin, but his gaze drifts on Jungkook for a moment before falling back on the cutting board.

"I'll protect your husband, do not fret," Jimin teases.

Jungkook expects Taehyung to respond with a zap of lightning, yet none of that happens.

“He can protect himself just fine,” Taehyung assures with an unwavering confidence leaving no place for doubt, then continues his discussion with Junhyun.

A heat flushes Jungkook's face and travels down his chest.

Jungkook swivels around, biting on his lower lip to tame down his uncontrollable smile at the indirect praise from the dragonborn. He schools his features when he catches Jimin’s sly smile that morphs around the word ‘lovebirds’.

Jungkook climbs on Jimin’s palm, the two of them flying toward Vanae’s main market and town.

The streets are bustling when Jungkook and Jimin arrive half an hour later. Some dragonborns are clad in heavy, warm clothes, while others are striding around in shirts and pants.

Jimin lands on the outskirts of the forest surrounding the market to drop the net he had taken with him.

Jungkook will never not be taken aback by the mutual trust between dragonborns, where piles of goods and other miscellaneous purchases are left unattended, no one seeming to worry about any potential thief.

Jimin sits on a boulder, rummaging through his pouch to retrieve a smaller one filled with coins. “Thank you."

Jungkook confusedly watches him. “Uh? For what?”

“For being patient with Taehyung. I know he can be… You know how he can be,” Jimin waves off with a small laugh. “He’s always had trouble with his temper, and it's even worse when it comes to understanding himself or others, you know?”

Jungkook has noticed that much.

“So people tend to give up on him. His people love him, don’t get me wrong. Vanae *adores* Taehyung, but it’s never like the relationship he has with his family, Hoseok or Seokjin. He keeps people at bay, both willingly and accidentally. But he tries to be good.”

“He wasn't with me at first.” Jungkook crouches and crosses his arms over his knees to prop his chin on them.

“Yeah, he wasn't. He's an idiot, and a judgmental one with humans. He’ll make up for that though."

“I just hope he’ll continue to try with me, otherwise I won’t. Now that I’m away from my parents, I don’t want to be stuck in one-sided relationships again. I want to live freely.”

“Taehyung is difficult, but he has a good heart. It was just damaged a lot, and not only due to Dohyun. Taehyung is a chaos dragon. It comes with its plethora of problems.”

“What do you mean?”

“Amongst all the different types of dragonborns that exist, chaos dragons are the most volatile ones, worse than fire dragons, and it reflects on their personality," Jimin explains.

Taehyung never speaks about his draconic heritage, Jungkook muses. Perhaps Jungkook should try to look for some books retelling dragonborn biology and history.

"The fact that they're so rare also doesn't help," Jimin continues. "Taehyung is the only chaos dragon in Vanae, and I think only a dozen more exist in Aurora. At least known ones.”

“Only a dozen?”

“Because humans, warlocks and dragonborns themselves are scared of chaos dragons. So they eventually disappeared, whether killed or out of fear.” Jimin plops down next to Jungkook on the grass. “Chaos dragons are one of the reasons why dragonborns managed to hold on during the Great War.”

Jungkook hums, curious to learn more about the elusive man. “How was Taehyung as a child?"

Jimin barks out a laugh. "He was pure anarchy, Jungkook. I feel like you and him would have gotten along well. He had the worst anger issues and temper, especially as a teenager, but it got better. He did."

"Were people afraid of him?"

"Yes. Because of his arcane."

Jungkook thinks of himself then: of a bathroom, of scornful words and isolation.

"Its potency and the variety of his breaths incited a lot of wariness among our peers, but fascination too. Some of the latter was kind, the rest of it not so much."

"How so?"

“People crave to control what is more powerful than them, and many have tried to subdue Taehyung.” Jimin has this distant, cold look in his eyes. “It's part of why he's so distrustful of others, of what their motives may be. *Especially* with humans," Jimin winces. "Anyway. Thank you for giving him a chance. Several chances, when he doesn’t necessarily deserve any after how he's been with you. I love Taehyung with everything I have, but I know he can be too much to handle sometimes.”

“I think I’ve been handling him fairly well,” Jungkook shrugs with playful cockiness.

“You have,” Jimin snickers. “Better than anyone else I know. Hell, better than *me*. Taehyung and I used to fight aaall the time.”

“Isn’t that what you always still do?”

“Shush.” Jimin bumps his shoulder against Jungkook’s, the two of them swaying from side to side. “I’m glad he can count on you, and I hope you know that you can count on him too now. Me and everyone else are here for you as well.”

Jungkook clears his throat to chase away the lump stifling him. “I’m starting to realize that."

Jimin’s smile lowers as he sobers up. “I’m glad the two of you can relate with each other. I know he lied to us."

Jungkook stills on his spot.

“Do you know?”

“Yes, I... It’s a long story, but I saw some pieces of what happened to him six years ago."

Jimin pensively peers ahead. “You're really strong, Jungkook. I wouldn’t have been able to digest seeing what Dohyun has done to him.”

“Taehyung is the strong one for allowing me to see.”

“You both are. Stop deflecting. Say,” Jimin starts and his gaze locks on Jungkook, “if I ask you to show me what you saw, will you?”

Jungkook's tone is sharper than intended when he answers. "No."

Jimin hums a chuckle. “It’s nice to know you’ll protect him as much as he’ll protect you. He’ll work to earn your forgiveness.”

“He already is.”

“Good, good. Don’t let him get off the hook too easily. Make him work for it.”

“I certainly will."

“Now, dear prince of ours.” Jimin springs to his feet, pulling Jungkook up with him. “Let’s forget about those heavy talks, shall we?”

Jungkook nods. “Where do we start?”

Jimin presents his elbow to Jungkook who links their arms together, the two of them walking side by side as they make their way through Vanae’s market. “I may have an idea of where Taehyung will be taking you, and he said you’ll be walking there, right?”

“He did, yes.”

“You’ll need comfortable yet stylish clothes, then, and I know just the right place.”

They soon pause in front of the large bay window of a shop adorned with hanging plants and carefully crafted lanterns. A bell rings when they enter. Jungkook gasps when he sees a familiar face at the checkout counter.

“Hoseok?”

Hoseok’s head swinging to the side. “If it isn’t the pretty prince!"

“They sell all kinds of clothes on top of the bespoke tailoring they do,” Jimin clarifies.

Hoseok flutters his lids, a cheeky smile on his lips. “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you both today?”

“We’re shopping for Taehyung and Jungkook’s date,” Jimin announces.

Hoseok’s grin turns wolfish, mirrored by Jimin’s.

Jungkook questions if it’s too late to backtrack.

“Jungkook,” Jimin begins and Jungkook braces for the worst, “on a scale of burlap potato sack to lace lingerie, how much do you want to seduce Taehyung during the date?”

Jungkook sputters, a heat crawling up his neck. “I don’t want to seduce Taehyung?! What is *wrong* with you!” He tries to not let his mind wander at the mention of lingerie, something he has never crossed paths with, but he does anyway, a flash of curiosity flaring in him.

Jimin’s eyes narrow. “You’re lying to me?”

“I… No?” Jungkook mumbles through a pout. “I don’t want to seduce him. I’m inept when it comes to this, Jimin. Plus Taehyung doesn’t like me this way, and neither do I.”

“You don’t?”

“No,” Jungkook says but it comes out more as a wavering question rather than a confident statement. “He’s interesting. *I* do like him as a friend, but I don't know if it's reciprocated. We aren't friends, but aren’t enemies either. We’re husbands, but we aren’t actually in love. So…”

Hoseok arches a brow. “A friend, you say."

“He's my *husband*,” Jungkook mumbles, fidgeting with the white scale dangling around his neck. “I've never had proper crushes or anything like that. I never got the chance to even think of such things. However I am very, *very* gay, and Taehyung is a very, *very* gorgeous man. So— I mean… He flusters me sometimes, and we were on the rooftop a few nights ago and he was really close to me, right? And my heart was beating a little fast but I don’t like him like that.”

“By the elders,” Jimin and Hoseok both groan. “The two of you are a lost cause."

“Shut up.” Jungkook lightly punches Jimin’s arm. “He’s just— He’s fun and I really enjoy my time with him. And he’s funny. And kinda hot. And smart, although he can be incredibly dumb too every now and then. So… But yes. It’s not like— I mean. No." He covers his face with his hands. "God, I’m confusing myself. I don't know what I’m saying.”

“Let me clarify it for you: you may be developing a crush for Taehyung,” Jimin declares.

Jungkook lowers his arms. “I’m not.”

“Which is normal,” Hoseok continues.

“He is your husband after all.”

“I said I’m not,” Jungkook repeats.

“There’s nothing wrong with—”

“I don’t want to think about that, so drop it,” Jungkook snips, his temper ignited.

“Alright. It’s alright, sorry,” Jimin says with a sheepish smile. “We overstepped, we were just teasing.”

Jungkook sighs, the muscles of his jaw relaxing. “I like spending time with him. I want to get to know him better and be closer to him, and I think that’s enough for now.”

“It’s more than enough,” Hoseok nods. “But do you still want to dress up?” He adds with a wiggle of his brows.

“Yes, I always do for every occasion,” Jungkook chuckles.

Hoseok claps his hands in two quick successions. “Let us shop!”

“Don’t you have a clientele to handle?” Jimin interjects.

“Eh,” Hoseok shrugs and steps away from the checkout counter.

“Do you want to dress up for yourself while leaning toward Taehyung’s tastes as well?” Jimin wonders.

Jungkook ponders. “Both?”

“Taehyung likes simple things.”

“And black.”

“Red as well,” Jungkook adds.

Hoseok loudly gasps. “I have an idea. Jungkook, do you like harnesses?”

“I don’t know? I’ve never really worn any, but I do like je—”

“By the Elders! Yes!”

Jungkook doesn’t get the chance to say more as he’s swept away by the two dragonborns.

Shopping is as fun as it is exhausting.

Hoseok and Jimin are *especially* enthusiastic about dragging Jungkook across the different sections of the shop. Hoseok takes care of the clientele that visits the shop while joining Jungkook and Jimin whenever he’s done to help them peruse.

Jungkook tries a harness at some point. It’s a tad strange at first, however the longer he wears it and stares at himself in the mirror, the more comfortable he grows.

Quite frankly, Jungkook is developing a quick liking for the accessory. On top of being unexpectedly secure, it also draws the eyes on Jungkook’s petite waist while complimenting the rest of his muscles, as Jimin wisely points it out.

“Honestly,” Jimin starts, his gaze doing a once over of Jungkook’s final outfit, “if Taehyung’s hands aren’t around your waist at all times, I don’t understand him.”

“Shut up,” Jungkook hisses and yanks the curtain close. He doesn’t know if he’d manage *'Taehyung's hands being on his waist at all time'* , however the thought prompts a warm flush on his cheeks.

“You’re imagining it, aren’t you?” Jimin snickers.

Jungkook peeks out of the curtain to glare at Jimin.

“Ehh, you were.”

“Stop it.”

After swapping his clothes for the ones he had come in with, Jungkook makes his way toward the checkout counter.

“If you like the harness, you should try body chains when it’s warmer. Taehyung likes jewelry,” Jimin suggests.

“You’re insufferable,” Jungkook mutters and deposits his purchase on the counter as he — unwillingly — files the information somewhere at the back of his mind.

Jimin bursts into laughter and pats Jungkook’s back.

Hoseok wraps up Jungkook’s purchases in a paper bag that he closes with a cord, forming a bow at the front. Jungkook plucks out his pouch of coin and he pays Hoseok, adding a hefty amount for tipping.

“My, my, my, thank you, my dear prince,” Hoseok says with a solemn voice.

Jungkook shakes his head with a smile. “Do you want to join us?”

“Have to keep the shop running for another hour, unfortunately,” Hoseok pouts. “But Junhyun invited Jin and I to pass by later, so we can meet in an hour or so and leave together?”

“That’s perfect," Jimin agrees, looping a hand around Jungkook’s elbow. "We’ve got more shopping to do anyway."

Jungkook and Jimin make their exit, bidding Hoseok goodbye.

Jimin leads them inside a tavern.

There's a garden situated at the back where they settle in at a secluded table, away from prying eyes or ears. Jimin orders a coffee and some pastries while Jungkook chooses tea.

Jungkook sips on his beverage. It doesn't taste quite as good as the tea Taehyung prepares for him from time to time.

“Do you like perfume?”

“It depends,” Jungkook answers. “Why?”

“Do you want to shop for some? I need to buy a new one, I also have a date in a couple days."

Jungkook’s interest spikes. “Really?” He had noticed how Yoongi and Jimin had grown a little closer as they had worked together on the bracelet and rings. “With who, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“No one special,” Jimin waves. “Just some guy I’ll hook up with.”

Jungkook is curious.

He never had anyone with whom to speak about this kind of matter. Yoongi would categorically refuse to, while Namjoon has always been too busy with his work as Jungkook’s page.

“Have you had a lot of partners?” Jungkook inquires.

“Depends on what you mean by that?”

“Boyfriends, for example?”

“Not a lot, no. I don’t date anymore. The longest I’ve ever been with someone the past years was three months but it was just for sex, and I cut everything off when he confessed his feelings for me. I don’t do romantic shenanigans.”

“You don’t believe in it?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Jimin peers outside the window, chin tucked in his palm. “I don’t believe anyone could love me like that. If you think Taehyung is a handful, know that I’m even worse."

“Anyone refusing to love you is foolish and blind. You're wonderful, Jimin.”

Jimin surveys Jungkook, the curve of his lips dampened by a hint of sadness that veils his gaze. “Thank you. Same goes for you though. Have *you* ever had anyone?”

“No. I was never allowed to explore when it comes to this,” Jungkook confesses, playing with the bow of his purchases’ package.

Jimin leans forward, a certain buzz taking over his form as he stares at Jungkook. “I’m sorry, and you can slap me if it’s too invasive, but you never had sex, right?”

“I haven't... Not that I'm not curious, but I had to preserve myself for my future husband, so…”

“That’s a bit unusual,” Jimin remarks.

“It's a custom in human royalty.”

“Well, Taehyung’s a virgin too, so you’ve got that in common with him,” Jimin says amidst a bite. “He never had a boyfriend either.”

“It’s… Surprising, but also not.”

“How so?”

“It’s not surprising because Taehyung really doesn’t seem interested in this, but it still takes me aback because he’s attractive in many ways.”

“People used to throw themselves at his feet. Kind of. But they quickly gave up. Good looks don't make up for a shitty personality. I must say again that I genuinely love Taehyung," Jimin adds.

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

“I’m sorry. I have another question,” Jimin begins and Jungkook snickers with a nod, encouraging his friend to carry on. “Was sex *completely* prohibited? Do you ever, you know, enjoy yourself on your own?”

“Sometimes I do?” Jungkook shrugs. “Rarely, though. I find it quite dull, and unsatisfying.”

“Sex is good but it *can* leave a bitter taste on your tongue, pun intended,” Jimin winks and Jungkook muffles his laugh against his cup. “But I get you.”

“You do?”

“Every now and then, yeah. Most of the time, I just turn my brain off and focus on the sensations.”

“I suppose it makes sense."

“Now that you’re away from the two harpies that are your parents, you’re more than free to explore your sexuality. There’s some, ah, exotic shops further north. Want to visit one of them?” Jimin proposes with a quirked brow.

“Oh my God. No.”

But maybe another day, Jungkook thinks to himself.

They talk some more, the discussion effortlessly flowing between the two of them.

They leave the tavern half an hour later to visit a perfume shop. Jungkook is picky, refusing this bottle, twisting his nose at another, or grimacing at a third. He eventually stumbles on a sweet smelling essence that will hopefully aid in lessening the grim aspect of his scent that Taehyung has mentioned a few times.

Once done with their purchases, and after reconvening with Seokjin and Hoseok, the four of them depart from the market to travel back to Taehyung’s parents’ house.

The garden is lightened with a plethora of lanterns. Blankets are thrown on the couches that have been brought outside for the barbecue, all arranged around the bonfire crackling at the middle. The area smells of smoked meat, potatoes and spices that suffuse Jungkook’s nose when he deeply inhales.

His stomach grumbles.

“How was the outing, Jungkook?” Junhyun inquires.

“It was so much fun,” Jungkook grins, arms full of bags. “We’ll go shopping again after Taehyung and I’s date.” No protest erupts at his words. He searches around for a missing dragonborn. “Speaking of, where is he? I haven’t heard any grumbling in a while.”

Dahee barks out a laugh, slapping Junhyun’s knee. Her cheeks are rosy, her words slurred. “He’s inside with Revna.”

“Really?”

“He’s attempting to figure out the sigil on her head,” Yoongi explains.

“I tried to help, but, one: he kinda intimidates me, and by kinda, I mean a lot. Two: I don’t have your patience. He was getting frustrated and then *I* started to be frustrated too, and when literal *smoke* began to leave his nostrils, I left,” Namjoon says, eliciting laughter around him.

“I’ll be right back then,” Jungkook says.

“Let us begin now that everyone has arrived."

“I’m famished, Darling,” Dahee says through pursed lips. Junhyun rapidly gets to work, helped by the others.

Jungkook steps inside the house to quietly make his way toward the kitchen. His head turns to the side when he catches a sound.

Taehyung is sitting on the carpet at the coffee table, Revna sprawled on the latter and attentively studying what Taehyung is scribbling on a piece of parchment. “No, this isn’t it.” He groans and crumples the paper to throw it on the ground amidst the dozens more.

Revna clicks her tongue, talking about how Taehyung should keep trying.

“I have no idea what you just said to me,” Taehyung says, earning himself a nibble on the hand. “Bite me again and I’ll bite you too.”

Revna snuffs, dropping her head atop Taehyung’s wrist.

“I’ve never seen anything like your sigil. Makes no damn sense. What the fuck are you even.”

Revna gnaws on Taehyung's index finger, hissing a *‘You’re dumb’* that Taehyung does not understand.

“Did you insult me? I feel like you insulted me.”

Revna turns her head away from him.

“No wonder you’re such a brat too when you grew up with the Viper. Like Viper, like… basilisk.” Taehyung snorts to himself, and Jungkook presses a hand against his mouth to stifle his laugh. “I’ll have to ask Minsoo about this, maybe he knows something. I’m pretty knowledgeable about the Arcane, but even I can’t seem to figure out what that sigil of yours means. Like, you see this rune?”

He points at a drawing that Revna looks at. “It resembles your sigil a bit, but it’s still too different to match, and the problem is that…”

Neither Taehyung nor Revna appear to have noticed Jungkook’s presence, one too busy rambling, and the other too occupied listening.

Jungkook fondly watches the two converse together — even if only one understands the other —, happiness swelling in him at how Taehyung and Revna slowly bond together. Taehyung has even kept the ruby the whole time Jungkook was gone.

Jungkook holds his breath as he climbs over the sofa to crouch on it.

Taehyung’s instincts haven’t sensed him yet, and he uses this to his advantage.

Jungkook leans closer to Taehyung, and when barely an inch separates his mouth from Taehyung’s ear, he says “Boo.”

Taehyung startles, hard enough for his knee to slam against the table that he fissures, and for the quill to break into splinters in his hand. A strangled squeak is wrenched out of his throat as he swivels around, his wide eyes settling on Jungkook.

The surprise slowly morphs into a dark glower.

Jungkook makes a move to run away from the dragonborn’s wrath, however he’s snatched by the collar of his top and yanked down in one smooth motion, his bags falling from his grip. He blinks, suddenly finding himself laid on his back, half on the ground, half on the couch.

Taehyung is holding a glass of water above Jungkook, the liquid menacingly oscillating. “I will drown you.”

Jungkook bursts into a series of mirthful chuckles. “I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

“No I’m not. The sound you made,” Jungkook gasps, tears springing in his eyes from his hilarity. “It was like that rat I killed.”

Taehyung releases Jungkook’s shirt to place his glass on the table. “Your humor is completely fucked.”

Jungkook’s mind conjures Taehyung's shocked face along with the noise that had left his mouth and he doubles over, sent into another fit of laughter.

“Can you shut up already.”

Jungkook does, after another five minutes of endless laughter, and he sniffles, dabbing his eyes. He can't remember the last time he has laughed to a point of breathlessness. “I’m sorry.”

“You and I both know that you aren’t, so quit it."

Jungkook lifts an arm to muffle his giggle but fails. “M’not.”

“Fucking brat,” Taehyung mutters but it lacks any actual ire. He grabs a new quill while brushing away the pieces of the shattered one.

Jungkook remains on the carpet, his hands folding over his belly as he stares up at Taehyung.

It’s unfair how beautiful the dragonborn is even from a downward view that should not be this flattering. Because, really, how can someone look good from an angle where nostrils can be seen? It’s ridiculous, and what’s more ridiculous is the sense of pride that blossoms in Jungkook.

Jungkook's husband is handsome. *His* husband is knowledgeable, intelligent, and so unbelievably beautiful. *And Jungkook's.*

Taehyung isn’t wearing the headband, so the curls of his hair drape over his forehead, framing his face and nape.

Jungkook wants to touch Taehyung’s hair. He has been for a while. The strands always seem so soft and silky, and Jungkook gets a little envious when Taehyung gets to card a hand through them.

Taehyung’s gaze snaps on Jungkook.

Jungkook jolts on his spot.

“What are you staring at?”

“My husband?”

Taehyung’s eyes narrow. “Is there something on my face?”

“Moles,” Jungkook stupidly says.

Taehyung rolls his eyes. He surveys the bags laying limply on the couch. He grabs one of them but Jungkook snatches it back.

“No.”

“What’s inside?”

“Clothes.” Jungkook gathers the rest of his purchases.

“Why the secrecy if it's just some clothes?”

“Because it’s what I’ll wear for our date.”

Taehyung silently peers at Jungkook, and it’s one of those times where Jungkook has no idea of what may be going through the dragonborn’s mind.

“Not a date," Taehyung eventually says.

“Yes it's a date, prick.” Jungkook shivers at the prickles that run down his arm when Taehyung zaps him. “Aren’t you eating with us?”

“We were waiting for the rest of you.”

“Aww.”

“Shut up, Viper.”

“Waiting for your husband to come home? That’s very precious of you,” Jungkook obnoxiously croons. He snorts when Taehyung pinches the bridge of his nose.

“You’re testing the limits of my patience like no one else ever has before, not even Jimin, Hoseok or the Woobin jackass.”

“Taking that as a compliment.” Jungkook rolls on his side to stand up seconds later. “I’m gonna take a quick shower,” he announces to Taehyung as he had earlier before leaving with Jimin. “Can you keep a spot for me, please?”

“Hurry it up."

This is all the confirmation Jungkook needs. “Yes, yes."

Jungkook rushes upstairs. He stores his burden in the wardrobe of the bedroom he, Yoongi and Namjoon have been occupying while staying at Dahee and Junhyun's house.

Less than ten minutes later, he emerges outside, swathed in a thick blanket and Taehyung’s sweater that still smells like smoky embers and petrichor. Jungkook rushes outside, eager to be with everyone else and eat.

A warmth rises in him as he watches the group settled in the couch or on heaps of blankets and pillows on the ground.

His gaze drifts on Taehyung.

Taehyung is laughing at something Seokjin has said, Seokjin’s contagious laughter erupting in the garden. The shadows of the campfire’s flames dance over Taehyung’s face who’s nursing a glass of water. His chuckle subdues to a smile that bunches up his cheeks and crinkles the corner of his eyes.

Taehyung glances toward Jungkook.

Technically, Jungkook knows this is a happenstance.

That Taehyung’s smile isn’t addressed at Jungkook because Taehyung had been talking with *Seokjin*, that he just happens to be looking in Jungkook's direction.

In spite of this, Jungkook still flusters when Taehyung peers at him while smiling. It doesn’t even last for long, perhaps half a second, but it suffices for a different kind of warmth to grow, an itchy one that climbs up his neck.

Jungkook ducks his head, tugging the hood over it as he makes his way toward the group.

Taehyung has listened to Jungkook’s request, or maybe it’s another coincidence, however there’s a free spot next to him that Jungkook settles in, comfortably nestled between a pillow on his right and Taehyung on his left.

Taehyung takes the pile of dishes. He stands to round the bonfire and give everyone a plate. He skips Yoongi, his childishness never failing to amuse Jungkook. Dahee chastises Taehyung, an angry flush tinting Taehyung’s cheeks.

Hands curled around his plate, Jungkook leans forward to begin serving himself, however he's preceded by Hoseok, then Seokjin and soon the rest of the group that shoulder each other to serve themselves first.

Jungkook sits back down, the plate on his lap as he waits for his turn.

"What do you want?" Taehyung asks.

Jungkook makes a questioning sound.

"What do you want to eat?" Taehyung clarifies.

"Oh! Uh, sweet potatoes, and some pork belly with some rice?"

Taehyung does nothing else as he resumes his conversation with Hoseok.

Jungkook is perplexed, to say the least. His puzzlement wavers when his plate is taken from him by Taehyung who is still arguing with both Jimin and Hoseok now.

Has he done something wrong?

Jungkook's mouth opens to ask, but he closes it when Taehyung stands.

Taehyung walks toward one of the square pans roasting the pork belly. He cooks it for a little longer before taking some pieces. Jungkook watches as Taehyung fills the dish with three roasted sweet potatoes, a large handful of pork belly, and several scoops of rice. Taehyung also adds some vegetables and drizzles the meal with the sauce that had been prepared this morning.

Is Jungkook not allowed to eat yet? What has he done wrong?

"All I'll add is that I was right, as I often am," Taehyung says to Jimin who scoffs.

"Maybe we could ask Woobin then, huh?" Hoseok jests.

"Not if you want to live to see another day." Taehyung walks back to the couch Jungkook occupies. He's not even looking at Jungkook when he hands him the plate. "That fucker *did* cheat," Taehyung glowers.

Jungkook reflexively takes the full plate.

Taehyung argues some more but the words don't register in Jungkook's brain.

Jungkook stares at the back of Taehyung's head while the dragonborn serves *himself* this time, with a lot more food and while adding a couple grilled ribs on top of the pile.

The plate was for Jungkook.

The itchy warmth softly quivers, scratching at a place in Jungkook's chest that oscillates with contentment. His gaze moves toward Dahee who's sporting a knowing smile that she punctuates with a wink.

Jungkook's lips curl upward, his head lowering to look at *his plate.*

He doesn’t have any chopsticks, he notes, and he’s about to ask for a pair when Taehyung plops down next to him.

“Yeah, but like, that’s mercy on my part. I could easily win,” Taehyung assures. Jimin rolls his eyes. “I could, and I will next time.”

Taehyung gives to Jungkook one of the two pairs of chopsticks he's holding. Jungkook doesn’t grab it, too absorbed by the yarn Taehyung makes and the additional bow Jungkook unfastens tonight.

Jungkook snaps out of his stupor when Taehyung taps the chopsticks on Jungkook’s hand.

“Vanae to Viper.”

“Sorry.” Jungkook retrieves the cutlery.

“What was I saying already,” Taehyung muses. “Ah, I remember: killing Woobin,” he sputters through a bite. “That’s my next project. It’s been long overdue.”

“Why? You’re scared of him winning against you again?” Hoseok taunts.

“Fuck off,” Taehyung starts and launches himself into an explanation as to why he had lost a fight once.

Jungkook begins to eat. His attention narrows down to Taehyung’s voice and proximity, to the warmth the dragonborn emanates.

Jungkook’s food tastes the best it has in a while.

Taehyung’s nose twists. He leans toward Jungkook then makes a curt inhalation.

“Did you just *smell me?”*

Taehyung recoils. “Why the fuck do you smell like that?”

Jungkook's brows furrow. “Like what?”

“Like you rolled around in a pile of marshmallows, sugar and vanilla at once. It’s disgusting."

Jungkook doesn’t recall having put on *that* much perfume. “I don’t smell bad.”

“You do. It’s sickeningly sweet and not in a good way.”

“I bought a new perfume yesterday,” Jungkook mumbles through a pout.

“You should get it reimbursed.”

Jungkook levels Taehyung with a pointed look before walking up the stairs. He pours some water on his neck and wrists where he had sprayed some of the perfume. He comes back down a couple

minutes later. “Is that better, prick?”

Taehyung sniffs once in Jungkook’s direction. His form relaxes. “Much.”

“You can just say so if you like Jungkook’s scent,” Jimin comments.

Jungkook perks up.

He hadn't thought of that.

“Do you like my scent?” Jungkook has always been self-conscious about it since he knows it can hold this grim aspect personal to his arcane.

“No,” Taehyung states.

“Translation: *‘Yes, I do, but admitting this would go against the promise of emotional constipation I vowed to the wood sticks shoved up my ass. So I, unfortunately, cannot confirm to you that I, in fact, do like how you naturally smell,’*” Jimin assures.

Jungkook, who had been miffed at Taehyung’s remark, chuckles and peers at Taehyung. “Is it true?”

“I said no.”

“That’s a yes,” Jimin intervenes once more. “You can pay me as your designated Taehyung translator. I’ll lower my fees. Friend discount.”

Taehyung’s head darts toward Jimin. “How about I shut you up with my fist in your mouth?”

“It’s not really my kind of thing. At least not as the recipient of it."

Taehyung leans over the kitchen counter, making a gagging noise as he shakes through a fake shudder. “I don’t want to know what you do with your flings.”

Jungkook rapidly blinks, half amused by Taehyung’s dramatics and half confused by Jimin’s words. “Because a fist can… fit? *Inside* someone?” He peers at his own hand that he tightens into a fist. “This is impossible.”

“If a dragonborn’s knot can fit inside someone’s ass, I can assure you that a fist can as well,” Jimin says, hunched over the coffee table where he’s working on some metal utensils that have been commissioned to him.

“What’s a knot?” Jungkook asks with a tilt of his head.

“Yeah. Alright. No. We’re not having this discussion. *No.* Moving on.” Taehyung drags Jungkook toward the counter. “Stop fucking corrupting him,” he hisses and kicks Jimin’s shin when they walk by him.

“I’m *educating* him. The knowledge may come in handy one day.” Jimin guffaws at his own joke, high-fiving Namjoon who passes by with a snort.

“What’s a knot?” Jungkook reiterates.

“Moving. *On*.”

“Fine,” Jungkook sighs with a roll of his eyes. He readjusts his black and white top that is tucked in the burgundy, baggy trousers he's wearing. The harness is fastened over his chest and shoulders, the buckles tight yet comfortable around his waist. “So,” he begins, “I got four bottles of water, a few thick blankets and some pillows as well. I also put on a pair of swimming shorts like you asked? I don't know why we need that because I'm not swimming in the freezing water. I took the necromancy book we got from the old man at Eden too. I thought we could try to decipher it?”

Taehyung surveys the hefty bags with a critical eye. “Why are you bringing the whole house with you...”

“I brought the essentials for a picnic. You said we're coming back here later tonight, and it's early morning right now. Although, why is there toilet paper?”

“You'd prefer wiping your ass with abrasive *or* poisonous leaves?”

“You're so crude...” Jungkook says with a faux moue, biting back a smile.

Taehyung grabs both bags, slinging one over each shoulder before making his way outside. “Come on."

Jungkook jogs after Taehyung, buzzing from anticipation because of how cryptic Taehyung had been about where their date will be held. “I’m so excited."

“First time going outside or what?”

“It’s my first time going on a *date*.” Jungkook internally cackles at the expected sigh Taehyung heaves.

“Still not a date.”

“Jimin and I would beg to differ.”

“You’re lea—”

Dahee is interrupted by Junhyun shouting a *‘Wait!’* as he runs toward Jungkook and Taehyung, holding a large picnic hamper. “Leftovers from yesterday’s dinner. I have also baked some additional pastries this morning. It is very exciting.” Junhyun presents the basket to Jungkook with a smile. “Taehyung has never gone on a date.”

“Not. A date.”

“I’ve never been to one either,” Jungkook says, ignoring Taehyung’s protest like everyone else is.

“It will be fun.” Junhyun nods, his arm curling around Dahee’s waist. “I still dearly cherish the first date with my mate."

Taehyung’s scowl deepens. “He is not—”

“It was certainly peculiar,” Dahee giggles.

“You have the rings and bracelets with you?” Jimin wonders as he arrives as well, accompanied by Yoongi and Namjoon.

Jungkook shows the jewelry to Jimin.

“We’ll be fine," Taehyung grunts. "Best case scenario: I flatten the area, worst case scenario: he raises my dead corpse."

Jungkook smacks a hand on Taehyung’s arm. “Don’t say that! You’ll jinx us.”

“You’ve got the tracking spell and we have the teleportation leaf in the bracelet, we’re safe,” Taehyung assures. “I told you the spot we’re going to. We should be back tonight but we might stay a little longer.”

“Yeah.” Jimin hugs Taehyung, the latter hugging him back. “Your arcane is good?”

“All back,” Taehyung grins and separates from Jimin. “Thank the Elders.”

“Enjoy yourself then.” Jimin has an ink dragon on his shoulder, the same one that has been following him around today. Revna, wrapped around his arm, sniffs at the tiny dragon.

“Have fun, Jungkook,” Yoongi smiles and ruffles Jungkook’s *neatly styled hair*. Jungkook bats Yoongi’s hand away. “Enjoy that first date. God knows you two need that date as husbands. Especially since neither you and Taehyung have been on a date before. Are you excited about this *date*, Taehyung?”

Everyone laughs at the teasing except the one at the receiving end who swivels around.

“That’s my cue to leave before I burn everything down.”

Jungkook kisses Revna’s crown as a goodbye, having decided to let her enjoy her time with the others while Jungkook does so with Taehyung. “Bye!”

Jungkook chases after Taehyung. Once at the dragonborn’s side, he opens the pan of the heavy basket. “Wow... He packed a lot of food.”

“Most likely to last for days."

“At the very least, yes.”

“Yeah, it’s in case anything happens.”

“Oh… He’s sweet..."

Taehyung appears lost in thoughts, and Jungkook uses this moment of inattention to shamelessly rake his eyes over his husband’s form.

Taehyung is wearing some sort of loose, leather pants along with a tight fitting, long sleeved shirt adorned with black motifs. The apparel doesn’t differ much from what the dragonborn usually wears, and Jungkook doesn’t mind it at all. The style is eons away from Jungkook's, but there is something so *Taehyung* about it, perhaps in its simplicity yet coordinated aesthetic.

Jungkook’s attention focuses back on the path when he trips over a root, steadied by Taehyung.

The first part of their trip to the location Taehyung is leading them to is quiet.

Jungkook observes the forest's lush vegetation and eclectic wild life that makes Amaris' land seem barren in comparison. Vanae's fauna and flora is much more vibrant and alive, arcanic creatures and regular animals populating the forest.

Reminded of his and Taehyung's late night discussion regarding botany, Jungkook says "Your mother told me you had made me an ointment for my wounds after we escaped the manor." A thin layer of snow covers the soil and Jungkook shuffles closer to Taehyung, soaking up on the dragonborn's warmth. "You used nixes?"

"The crimson and emerald bells. I couldn't use their full properties since I was lacking tools and time, but they did enough to stave off any potential infection."

"How are those two supposed to be used with proper tools?"

Taehyung launches himself into a detailed explanation that Jungkook gorges on, hanging onto every word. Taehyung seems to lose a lot of his inhibition, his words beginning to slur together in this tattletale sign of excitement.

From that point onward, Jungkook and Taehyung chat — and bicker — together without much lull in the conversation.

It's wonderful.

At first, the discussion revolves around the flora, but when a strange animal flies by them, it turns toward other creatures residing in the forest. It leads them to speak about arcanes in general, Taehyung educating Jungkook about the different types of dragons that exist.

Jungkook has never pondered on how powerful Taehyung truly is.

He has seen Taehyung create two storms from scratch, flatten an area or burn an entire field back at the manor, however Taehyung had been exhausted. While the storms had been impressive, Jungkook still had a feeling that the dragonborns had been holding back.

Jungkook can't help but imagine a world where Taehyung can use all of his breaths at the same time. The destruction Taehyung could reap then would be so mesmerizing to witness.

Would Taehyung show Jungkook the full power of one of his breaths if he were to ask?

Probably not.

Jungkook also wonders what the last two breaths Taehyung owns but has never disclosed may be. He won't ask, out of respect and to not be pushy. However Taehyung still mentions that his 6th and 7th breaths are 'useless', according to him. It only serves to heighten Jungkook's curiosity.

"But I'll never tell you what they are," Taehyung continues. "You'll have to figure them out by yourself."

“You’re a prick, you know that?” Jungkook grumbles. He pauses when Taehyung does. “And where are we going? You still haven’t told me.”

“Inside a cave.”

“What? But you said we were going high up!”

“I never said that. *You* assumed we were going high up."

It’s true, but Jungkook contests nonetheless. “Still. A cave…?”

“Yup.”

"That's not very romantic."

"Exactly."

Jungkook peers ahead. “ *This* cave?”

“Herself.”

Jungkook huffs a chuckle. “I thought we had two and a half hours of walking to do.”

“Yes, and it’s 10:20 am,” Taehyung says after checking his watch.

“Uh.” Jungkook had thought half an hour had passed at most.

Taehyung summons his fire breath that coils around his hand in a makeshift torch.

He and Jungkook step in the cave.

It’s colder inside than it is outside. Jungkook remains close to Taehyung as they dive deeper in the cave, taking a turn to walk down a steep incline.

“Is there a secret high spot from there?”

“No, we’re staying in the cave.”

“Will you actually take me to a high spot one day?”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook, his dark eyes a molten honey from the flames reflecting in them. “Sure. Just thought it wouldn’t be a good idea to go to one now.”

“Why not?”

“Because the manor was enough fright for the month. Aren’t you afraid of heights?”

Jungkook silently peers at Taehyung.

Taehyung does not even seem to realize himself how—

Jungkook nearly faceplants amidst his daydreaming, catching himself on a wall.

“Can’t you walk?”

“My legs are tired.” They aren’t. “Carry me.”

“I’ve been carrying two heavy bags the whole trip.”

“Aren’t you strong? I’m sure those bags weigh like feathers for you, and I’m also certain that you could carry them *and* me.”

“I can, but I don’t want to, so walk or I leave you here. Or better, I drag you across the ground.”

“You’re annoying.” Jungkook holds onto Taehyung’s arm nonetheless.

Their trek carries them farther and farther away from the entrance. They soon reach another incline that goes so far down Jungkook can’t see the bottom of it, the latter buried in the darkness.

“I can’t go down there,” Jungkook says, dizzy from simply looking down.

Taehyung drops his burden. He takes the basket from Jungkook’s hands to stash it in one of the bags and he slings the bags’ handles around his chest to free his arms. “Come on.”

“Taehyung. That’s way too high, and the rocks are really sharp. They could tear me apart if I were to fall." Some of the boulders look unstable too, crackles erupting here and there.

“I’ll help you down.”

Jungkook ponders on asking Taehyung to bring his wings out, but Taehyung may not be comfortable with that. “Okay…”

Taehyung shoots a ball of fire that hovers in the air, giving them enough light to see where they step. He climbs down on a rock then extends his arms for Jungkook to hold onto as Taehyung guides him on the flat surface of a boulder he precariously balances on. Jungkook trusts Taehyung to catch him if he falls.

His mind also tries to focus on the task at hand, but it wanders toward the *tangible* hands that hold onto him in a secure grip. Then his attention drifts to the way the muscles in Taehyung's bicep flex under Jungkook's palms when the dragonborn easily lifts Jungkook to prop him on a narrow platform. It's distracting in the best way possible.

They reach a fairly small cliff moments later.

Taehyung effortlessly leaps down, and Jungkook is reminded of a similar occurrence that has happened before, when Jungkook had been perched in a tree. Except that this time, the space between himself and the ground is greater, and he says so to Taehyung.

“I’ll still catch you.” Taehyung extends his hands toward Jungkook. “Jump.”

Jungkook does so without overthinking it too much.

Taehyung deftly catches Jungkook, softening the landing. “Wuss,” Taehyung teases before letting go and turning around.

“Prick.”

The phantom presence of Taehyung’s palms is warm on Jungkook's waist.

The flames of Taehyung's fire flicker across the blue hues of the minerals lighting the tunnel they walk through. The path is sinuous, barely enough space for one person to squeeze through at a time. When they arrive on the other side of it, they take another series of smaller caves and channels that bring them lower underground.

"We're here," Taehyung announces and stops at the end of yet another cliff, albeit much shorter.

Jungkook pauses next to Taehyung, and a gasp tumbles out of his mouth.

The first matter that catches Jungkook's attention is the *humongous* tree settled at the far back of the area, the space so vast that it could easily accommodate four dragons as large as Taehyung. A grand waterfall occupies the left side with a plunge pool at the bottom, the minerals' light brightening the water in oscillating blues.

"Oh my God…"

Jungkook peers up next, because it feels as though the sun is shining inside, yet he can see the rocks and lichens forming the cave above him, illuminated by a blanket of tiny bright dots.

Orange spheres dangle from the high ceiling too, most of them concentrated in the tree's branches. They cast golden hues across the room.

"Are these fruits?" Jungkook inquires.

Taehyung looks surprised at Jungkook's deduction. He nods.

It's warm inside. So much so that the cave feels like a cocoon of summer amidst a chrysalis of winter.

Jungkook begins to remove his coat. "Why is it so warm?"

"You'll see." Taehyung's excitement seeps into his voice, translated by the smile that floats on his lips. "I have been down there for years," he says and leads Jungkook toward the makeshift stairs they climb down.

"I get why you told me to bring swimming shorts," Jungkook notes, sounds of the water stream echoing through the cave.

"Yup."

They pass by the cascade. Jungkook has never seen water so translucent and blue, beautifully mingling with the golden tints of the fruits and strange dots littering the ceiling. "God... This is gorgeous." He pauses next to a pile of fossilized *something*. "What's that? Can I touch it?"

"Yeah, you can."

Jungkook hunches over the heap. He probes a finger at it that sinks into the matter. It feels like some sort of soft rock.

"It's a pile of insect shit, by the way."

Jungkook freezes. He yanks his hand away. "You absolute prick!" He doesn't hold back as much as he usually would when he punches Taehyung's arm. "You're *so* infuriating! I hate you so much,"

he grumbles and walks toward the plunge pool, crouching in front of it. “Is it safe to use to wash my hands? Or is it secretly dragon piss?”

Taehyung snorts, his shoulders shaking. “It’s fresh and clean water. You can drink it too."

Jungkook dips his hand in the pool. “It’s so warm,” he exclaims, cleaning himself from the aftermath of his curiosity and Taehyung’s torment.

He skips after Taehyung who's settling in front of the tree trunk. Some grass has grown there, spreading across the ground and offering a comfortable cushion.

“What is this cave? And what’s this tree? Are the fruits edible? Also, you said insect feces, and are the insects the shiny dots above? Oh, are they regular insects or arcanic ones? Oh my God, they look like butterflies,” Jungkook realizes. “Is it—” He comes to a halt when he notices Taehyung’s gaze on him. “Sorry. I’m excited.”

“Help me get everything out,” Taehyung says, opening one of the two bags. "We’re staying here."

Jungkook and Taehyung retrieve the beige blankets that they sprawl and stack above each other in an alternative mattress. They wordlessly take out the picnic hamper, the few pillows and the bottles of water.

Jungkook neatly arranges everything on the comforters while Taehyung climbs up the tree trunk, fluffing the pillows out and placing them next to each other. He removes his shoes and socks next, wiggling his toes and tired feet.

Taehyung sits down. “Come here.” He nods at a spot next to him.

Jungkook promptly complies, sitting in front of Taehyung.

“This tree is a meliacitrea,” Taehyung starts and splits open one of the fruits that must be three times the size of an orange. Syrup falls over the blanket, the inside of the fruit of a vibrant apricot color. “Its fruit is called melia. It also grows some flowers in summer.”

“So it tastes like honey and lemon?”

Taehyung peers at Jungkook.

“I know Latin," Jungkook clarifies.

“It does. Depending on how ripe the melia is, the lemon will be more or less strong.” Taehyung bites onto the fruit, giving the other half to Jungkook.

Jungkook munches on a piece as well. A sugary juice suffuses his taste buds. It’s not sickeningly sweet, the lemon balancing well with the honey. “It’s so good.”

“Look around,” Taehyung instructs and Jungkook does. “The cave is made of rocks and minerals where the waterfall is, but most of the structure is held by the roots of the meliacitrea. The roots are what carved this cave to begin with. Those trees only grow underground, you’ll never find them above unless they’ve been man grown.”

“It’s entirely made from the tree roots?” Jungkook asks, watching the ceiling and noticing then that what he had thought to be rock is dark, aged tree bark.

“Yeah. There’s still some rocks, of course, but the roots go feet and feet above us.”

“What if they burn?”

Taehyung flings a fireball at the tree’s head. The leaves and branches seemingly absorb the flames.

"Oh my God... Where are the lights from? The butterflies?”

Taehyung nods. “They’re called sacchaesrines, or summersweet butterflies. Their scientific name is Aestar Dulcis Rhopalocera. They only survive in warm temperatures, which the meliacitrea provides them with.”

“Do they eat meliacitreas’ sap?”

Taehyung peers at Jungkook the same way he had when Jungkook had figured out the basement’s secret, or when he had unlocked the shackles back at the manor. Taehyung’s scrutiny may not even be how Jungkook reads it — impressed or awed —, but Jungkook still preens under it.

“Yes,” Taehyung says. “This is why those who want to use summersweet butterflies as a way to light and warm up their house have to retrieve meliacitrea seeds and grow them in their home. But it’s a tedious process that requires a lot of maintenance.”

“It’s really fascinating.” Jungkook has to shut his mouth to not rave about how *Taehyung* is the most fascinating thing here.

“The tree emanates warmth so the butterflies can live here, meanwhile the butterflies feed on the tree’s sap and warmth, and then produce this light that also heats up the room and keeps the tree warm.”

“What happens if there’s something cold here?”

There's a cheerful glint in Taehyung's eyes. “I asked myself the exact same thing the first time I found this place."

“And?” Jungkook presses, a thrill rising in him at Taehyung’s growing one.

“Want to see?”

Jungkook enthusiastically nods.

“I’ll be right back." Taehyung walks toward the stairs leading to the entrance of the cave, disappearing in the tunnel.

Jungkook munches on the melia as he waits for him. They’ll have to come back here with Revna. The basilisk adores swimming, and she would bask in the ambient warmth that she often seeks.

Once done eating his half of the fruit, he finishes the other half Taehyung has left behind.

Footsteps echo through the cave.

Taehyung emerges from the tunnel, a hand raised above his shoulder. Three large spheres trail behind him, swirling with the dust and pebbles they must have picked up on the way here. He

throws the first two spheres at the ceiling. They flatten and merge into a disk that soon covers the entirety of the roof, while the third wind sphere is hurled at the tree where it expands.

Darkness suddenly falls inside the room.

The arctic minerals' light isn't intense enough to reach the grass covering the ground, let alone where Jungkook is settled under the tree.

"Taehyung?"

Not a single sound can be heard aside from the water's stream and some heavy fluttering that grows louder by the second.

The pulsations of Jungkook's heart begin to pick up. He slowly raises to his feet. The obscurity reminds Jungkook of when he had been in his cell, held captive by Dohyun. The candles had not lasted for long at the time.

"Taehyung. This isn't funny."

Jungkook's hand hovers above his bracelet and Yoongi's ring.

"Tae—"

Something touches him and Jungkook flinches away from it.

"Hey, it's me."

Jungkook peers down at the bracket. The bead that would lighten if someone is using some appearance changing spell remains black. "Don't—" He reaches out blindly.

"You're fine. I should have warned you before…"

Jungkook feels a hand touch his elbow. He extends his own to hold onto Taehyung's forearms. "Don't do that again." He steps closer to Taehyung as his palms slide up to the biceps.

"I won't."

"A warning would have been nice."

"I know now," Taehyung says after a beat. "I'll warn you if there's a next time."

Jungkook nods, but Taehyung must not be able to see him in the darkness. "I nodded," Jungkook announces. A huff elevates in front of him.

"I just wanted to show you something."

Jungkook lets himself be tugged by the wrist, prompted to sit down on the blankets before Taehyung lets go. Jungkook's hands fumble on the comforters to grab a pillow that he settles down on. "What are you doing?"

"I'm grabbing something." Some rustles then crackling erupt, followed by scraping and a snap.

Jungkook leans forward to hear better but as he does, his head knocks against a hard object. “Ow,” he groans and rubs at the spot where his and Taehyung’s heads had collided.

“You dumbass."

“I can’t see anything, you prick. Why aren’t you using your fire?”

“One second." Clothes rustling elevate in the air while a gust of wind blows past Jungkook. “Where the fuck are you?” Taehyung’s hands pat around and they sprawl over Jungkook’s knees where they stop. “Alright. Don’t move or I might accidentally burn you, which I wouldn’t mind, but—”

Jungkook smacks where he assumes Taehyung’s arm to be. He succeeds. “Shut up. Are you in front of me?”

“Obviously.”

“Okay. I’m ready.” A sound similar to the whirlwind of a miniature storm becomes louder and louder, as though the source of it is moving closer to Jungkook. “What’s that noise?”

“The cold wind I brought from deeper inside the cave. That’s what the spheres were as well.”

“Why are all the lights gone?”

“Watch.”

Jungkook looks ahead of him even if he can’t see anything. He hears some drawn-out puff of air, as though someone is exhaling.

Then, Jungkook sees flames appear before him that Taehyung blows out through his lips. The fire curls into a ball and gnaws at the cold wind swirling in Taehyung’s palm. It displays a branch of meliacitrea that he's holding between his thumb and index finger, lush of smaller twigs and leaves. It almost looks like a miniature tree.

When Taehyung closes his mouth, the flames vanish, and darkness is whole anew, only disturbed by the muffled, pulsing light the branch produces.

Fluttering flickers in the area, distant but growing closer.

A shadow passes in front of Jungkook, trailed by more. They cover the branch, concealing the already dim gleam.

The butterflies.

One of them shines in a tamed orange hue as it seemingly feeds onto the branch. A second butterfly illuminates itself, then a third, a fourth, a fifth, all quivering to life one by one.

Soon, the wings of every butterfly crowding the branch brighten.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung.

Stares, really.

The butterflies cast their golden bloom across the curves of Taehyung's face, the only source of light in the obscurity enveloping them. There's a small, barely noticeable curl on his lips. He reaches his free hand toward one of the butterflies that climbs on his finger.

He looks so relaxed.

At peace.

"The summersweet butterflies, the meliacitreas and its fruit all shut down when they come into contact with something cold. Although shut down is perhaps a strong word. Sleeping would be more accurate," Taehyung explains, his timber low, as though confiding a secret only for Jungkook to hear. "The butterflies are immortal, technically speaking. They can be killed, but they'll never die from aging or other natural causes."

The words aren't really registering in Jungkook's brain, too occupied by taking in Taehyung's beauty, and by relishing in how much Taehyung is sharing with him: with the existence of this cave, with the knowledge he has about the fauna and flora, and now with a demonstration so beautiful and personal when Taehyung could have simply told Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn't really know why, but a lump stifles his throat, moved with an emotion he can't extricate himself from. It seems to be a blend of gratefulness, happiness, and an ever growing yearn for more. It's different from Yoongi or Namjoon. It feels oddly intimate here, even if the sentiment mustn't be reciprocated.

He wants to thank Taehyung, but he doesn't want to sunder the serenity that has draped over them. "Can I hold the branch?" Jungkook opts to quietly say.

Taehyung presents it to Jungkook who carefully takes it.

The butterflies' wings flutter, and Jungkook lightly touches one of them that is warm under the pulp of his finger.

Taehyung stands and moves away to lay on his back, arms folded under his head.

Jungkook wants to reach out, feeling a little deprived of proximity, but he does not. Instead he lowers his hand that he balls into a fist, distracting himself with the nails biting at his skin.

Jungkook would hate for Taehyung to find him needy. Too overbearing.

"What is it?"

Jungkook startles.

The butterflies' wings rustle at the sudden movement.

"Uh?"

"Something's bothering you." Taehyung glances at Jungkook. "You've got that horrendous frown on your face."

"It's nothing," Jungkook answers, taken aback by the fact that Taehyung would even notice.

"And?"

“It’s not important,” Jungkook dismisses. “Is there anything else those butterflies can do?”

“And? What is it, Viper?”

“I said it’s not important,” Jungkook snips, his temper flaring up.

“If I’m pushing too much you can say the word, and I’ll drop it.”

Jungkook can. Maybe he will, but Taehyung isn’t pushing too much yet. “I was thinking about old stuff."

“Like?"

“Things I was told.”

“About?”

Jungkook hesitates for a brief lull, then he says “About how I shouldn’t ask for too much. How I don’t deserve to be asking for more than what I’m given."

“That’s rich coming from Seohyung who’s such a greedy pig that she wants to eradicate an entire race,” Taehyung scoffs. “But what about it? What she says doesn’t matter.”

Jungkook delicately rests the branch on the blanket so as to not hurt the butterflies. “It’s nothing."

“Viper.”

“I shouldn’t be needy.”

“Why not?” Taehyung asks in his usual simplicity.

“Because…"

’You don't deserve to be.’

‘You’re not worthy of my love, your father’s, or anyone else’s. You will never be.’

‘No one will ever give you what you want or … Why? … no one will ever care about you. Not a single man in this world will want to … You should be grateful that Seungwon...’

“...It’s annoying.”

“I guess some people find it annoying, but not everyone does.”

“Do *you* find it annoying?” Jungkook peers at Taehyung who’s hidden by obscurity.

“No one is needy with *me,* Viper, so I wouldn’t know.”

Jungkook has been a bit, though. He has sought Taehyung’s presence and more early on, especially lately as the dragonborn’s walls are slowly being thawed. “But what if someone is with you, would

it bother you?”

“Probably, yeah."

Jungkook chuckles to conceal the unwarranted pang of hurt that flickers in him.

“It’d depend on the person, I guess," Taehyung continues.

“Makes sense.”

Taehyung blows out a cone of fire that expands in the room and absorbs the cold wind.

The butterflies, the meliacitrea and its fruit all glow anew, bringing forth their warmth that had abated. He rises up and walks toward the tree trunk that he sits against. He then grabs a pouch that he retrieves his carving tools from, along with the piece of wood he has been working on for the past couple days.

“You speak like you’re the one who wants to be needy,” Taehyung says all of a sudden.

Jungkook stares at the dragonborn.

Quite frankly, Jungkook is offended by how emotionally adept Taehyung becomes whenever it’s time to put Jungkook on the spot.

“I didn’t say that.”

“All I’m hearing is no denial.”

“Can you not?”

“Seohyung and Sungmin told you all that bullshit?”

“Mainly Seohyung, as you've guessed, but other people too, like my teachers, handlers, and some of the maids,” Jungkook says, chin propped on his knees. “I was a clingy child. I used to cry a lot, beg for attention, things like that. It had gotten worse after Seohyung and Sungmin learned about my arcane. I was scared of my powers back then. Of lost souls. So the two people supposed to be my parents being even more aloof and cold with me had been an additional slap in the face. And then when they—” He halts. “At first Seohyung couldn’t stand being in the same room as me. She'd avoid me like a curse.”

“She really hates your ass.”

Jungkook snorts. "Understatement."

“Then you know better than to give any importance to whatever false nonsense coming out of her mouth." Taehyung's gaze drifts on Jungkook. “Anything she says is blinded by her hatred.”

“Like you were once?” Jungkook teases with a tug of his lips.

“The only person I’ve ever hated is the man with the scent. And Seungwon. And also that one meat seller at Vanae’s market who keeps trying to outdo me. Fucker has been a pain in my ass for years,” Taehyung mutters, prompting a chuckle out of Jungkook. “Hate requires energy and time, and I didn’t waste any of that on you, no offense. I definitely despised you though. Still do.”

“It must be why you're taking me out on a—”

"Not a date."

A silence floats between them that Jungkook eventually breaks.

“Then you think it’s okay to be a little needy? Or clingy?”

“I think it’s okay to be whatever you want to be. Who has a say in how you want to live?” When a butterfly lands on his nose, Taehyung sneezes, lightly batting the insect away. “Life is too short to care about what others may think of you.”

Jungkook unravels another piece of the puzzle Taehyung makes.

Taehyung’s transparent candor in the way he views the world and people is so refreshing to witness. It’s reassuring too, where Jungkook does not have to worry about what he says. He can simply remove the veneer of Amaris’ prince and be himself.

So Jungkook inches near Taehyung. He ponders on resting his head on Taehyung’s knee, but he doesn’t want to push his luck. Instead, he lays down next to him, head cushioned in the blankets as he watches Taehyung carve.

“Why didn't you take the basilisk with you?”

“I’ll tell her you called her that.”

“Don’t..."

Jungkook snickers. He wonders if Taehyung is asking because he would have liked if Revna had been here. “But to answer you, it’s because I wanted to spend some time with you only, and she wanted to be with Jin and Jimin. They’re spoiling her a lot, she loves it.”

“Everyone is spoiling her.”

“Especially you,” Jungkook says while Taehyung says “Except me.”

“I’m not."

“Sure, sure. It's not as if she was all round from all the potatoes and beef you fed her with last evening.”

“Fuck off.”

“Say,” Jungkook starts and only continues when Taehyung 's attention is on him, “do we really have to go back tonight?” He’s drowsy, but he doesn’t want to sleep and waste time that he could have spent doing something with Taehyung.

“We can stay for a couple days. Had a feeling you’d ask that, so I warned my parents.”

“That’d be nice,” Jungkook smiles. “No one should come here, yes?”

“I don’t think anyone knows this place aside from Jimin and I. And you, now.”

“So it’s safe then.”

“As safe as any place can be.”

“Are you worried about being here?”

Taehyung pauses in his carving of the horned-turtle.

He doesn’t reply right away, and Jungkook waits.

“Not as much as I expected. Are you?”

“Not at all. I feel safe around you.”

Taehyung huffs a scoff that sounds bitter. “Right. That’s why you were kidnapped along with me while I couldn’t do shit to prevent it from happening. I don’t know why you, of all people, would feel safe around me.”

“Because we’re together.” Jungkook's gaze finds Taehyung’s. “At the manor, we handled it together.”

“You did most of the work.”

“We handled it together,” Jungkook insists. “We've handled plenty of things together, like Seohyung, Sungmin or Dohyun. I don’t know about you, but I think you and I work well together. I may have not felt particularly safe with you at the beginning, but neither had I felt unsafe. But, now, I... I feel some sense of safety around you, because I know you’ll try your best to protect me, and I’ll do the same for you.”

“You trust me too much,” Taehyung mutters, brushing away some wood flakes from his leg.

“When I was hurt, you took care of me, and when you were, I did. When we fought at the manor, we went down together, then we rose up together. We–"

"I've failed us at the manor."

"You didn't."

"I have. I–"

"You did not. I *trust* you, Taehyung. I do."

Taehyung's face pinches, his motions curt where he continues to carve.

"I'm starting to feel safe." *For the first time.* "I just hope you do too around me.”

Taehyung's teeth grit. He slowly exhales then shakes his head. “You talk too much,” he ultimately answers but it has no bite in it.

Jungkook hums a chuckle. He continues to survey Taehyung’s carving, glancing here and there at Taehyung’s profile or at the soft looking hair.

Jungkook wakes up comfortably warm, covered by a blanket he doesn't remember having draped over himself, his head nestled on a pillow he also does not recall having placed beneath him.

His lids flutter open on the watch laying next to him.

It's 6pm.

He has slept for quite a few hours, to his dismay. He hoists himself up on his elbows, laid down on his front. He glances around and catches Taehyung settled further down the mattress of comforters, apparently fixing their dinner.

Jungkook yawns. He pushes himself on his knees to crawl toward Taehyung. He slumps on the dragonborn's right, sitting on his feet and clasping his hands together to tuck them between his thighs. His empty stomach grumbles. "I'm hungry," he announces.

"Yes, and what am I doing?" Taehyung responds without missing a beat.

"Preparing dinner."

"And what will you be doing?"

Jungkook throws a deadpan stare at Taehyung that the latter responds to with a quirk of his brow. "Wait," he mumbles through pursed lips, feeling cozy in the remnants of the somnolence clouding his mind.

"Exactly."

Taehyung carries on with his mixing of this with that, however it's taking a while, and Jungkook is *starving.*

Jungkook makes a motion to grab a piece of the sweet pork belly but Taehyung swats the hand away.

"Don't." The warning lowers Taehyung's timber, punctuated by a pointed look aimed at Jungkook.

"I'm hungry, and you're taking ages."

"Want me to make you wait longer?"

"No."

"Then wait," Taehyung says with finality.

Technically, Jungkook can very well make his own food and ignore Taehyung's temporary denial. Jungkook knows that. Taehyung must know it too. So, all in all, Jungkook doesn't have to listen to Taehyung or want to test the dragonborn's limits.

Jungkook does anyway.

He reaches a hand forward, bold and obvious, while he sneaks his other one behind Taehyung. Unfortunately, and as Jungkook had expected, Taehyung notices both movements. He lightly smacks Jungkook's right hand while grabbing the wrist of the left one. Taehyung doesn't seem annoyed in spite of how he always mentions his short patience.

"Was I speaking draconian?" Taehyung asks, and when Jungkook does not answer he says "This isn't a rhetorical question."

"No?"

"Then you heard and understood me perfectly fine. I told you to wait." Taehyung lets go of Jungkook. "I'm not done yet."

"I know, but I'm hungry."

"Imagine what would have happened if you had been patient? I'd be done already."

"What?" Jungkook peers down at Taehyung and notices how Taehyung's motions are slower than how they commonly would be. "You're doing this on purpose..."

"Strangely enough, the more you contest, the more tired my arms are. Odd phenomenon, huh?"

Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip to repress his smile. "You're a prick."

"And you're a fucking brat. Be patient."

Jungkook wants to probe at Taehyung a little more, but he's still sleepy after his nap, and so he relents. For now. "Okay."

"Good," Taehyung hums, concentrating back on his task.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung for a second but he averts his gaze to lift a hand to his mouth, hiding the smile he can't contain. He lays on his back and he draws his legs up to cross them at the ankle, feeling a little warmer than before.

"Can you grab me a melia from the tree?"

"Mhm." Jungkook rises to his feet and brings him the requested fruit.

Taehyung dices it, sliding the pieces in a bowl, and he adds some sauce to it that Jungkook can't identify.

This dinner follows the same patterns as yesterday's one: where Taehyung serves Jungkook first, the two of them soon eating in companionable silence.

Once done, Jungkook crouches in front of the plunge pool to clean his hands from the stickiness of the fruit.

A shadow looms over him.

Jungkook's head darts around. He squints at Taehyung. "Don't you dare toss me in the water."

"I hadn't thought of that, but now that you mention it…"

Taehyung lunges to grab Jungkook but he must underestimate him because he doesn't use all of his dragonborn strength, allowing Jungkook to easily break free from the grip. Taehyung's brows fly up his forehead, and it gives Jungkook a narrow window to throw Taehyung off balance and push him in the water. Jungkook catches himself on the edge, nearly toppling with him at the momentum.

The splash of Taehyung's body diving into the pool resonates through the silence.

Taehyung doesn't come out of the water for some time.

It's worrisome.

Then Jungkook *worries* when Taehyung's head peeks out, trailed by the rest of his torso. Jungkook is a little distracted by the way Taehyung cards his hands through his hair, slicking it back atop his crown, and by the way the soaked shirt clings to Taehyung's — *toned* – chest like a second skin.

"Uhh… Hey," Jungkook starts as he walks backward. "No need to get hasty."

"Run."

Jungkook doesn't need to be told twice.

He swivels around with a squeak, not looking back as he races away from the dragonborn. He doesn't even know where he's dashing to as long as it's far away from Taehyung, amusement bubbling inside him.

Something invisible makes him fall. He tumbles forward but braces himself on the ground before running away again. "Using your arcane is cheating!" Sounds of water then rapid footsteps chase after Jungkook. He's about to enter a tunnel when two hands seize him by the waist to lift and throw him on a shoulder. "Let me go!" Jungkook grips onto the back of Taehyung's drenched shirt.

"Oh, I will." Taehyung walks then pauses seconds later.

Jungkook tries to wrestle out of Taehyung's clamp but it's fruitless. So he resorts to what he does best in situations like these: biting.

His teeth sink into Taehyung's shoulder, not to a point of drawing blood, but enough to force Taehyung to release his clamp. Jungkook wrenches himself free and falls on his rear. He turns on his hands and knees and he's about to stand when Taehyung snatches Jungkook's ankle and yanks down, Jungkook flopping on his belly.

Jungkook twists on his back. He swings his leg at Taehyung who dodges it. "Let m—"

"You want to play, huh?" Taehyung rasps, all somber and intimidating — *and hot.*

"If it doesn't lead to my death, yes?" Jungkook unabashedly answers.

Taehyung drops Jungkook's foot.

Jungkook springs up. He attempts to run away once more, however he's pulled back by the buckles of the treacherous harness. Taehyung grabs Jungkook's forearms, but Jungkook's dexterity surpasses Taehyung's for a moment where he swiftly counters the dragonborn, now the one to hold onto the other's wrist.

“Why do you know how to fight?” Taehyung snips.

“I learned at the citadel,” Jungkook grins, cocky. “Even if Seohyung and Sungmin didn’t want me to.”

“Ah, yes, the Prince doing something he shouldn’t. Shocker.”

“Shut up.” Jungkook lets go of Taehyung to swat at his chest.

“You know how to fight."

“Ye—”

“But not as good as I do.”

When Taehyung moves, it’s fast, too much for Jungkook’s brain or body to process it, let alone retaliate.

He’s not sure on how it happens, however one second he’s standing, and the next he’s laid on his back on the ground, Taehyung crouched on his left and, *again*, trapping Jungkook’s wrists between his hands. Taehyung has an elbow dug on his knee, a palm supporting his chin as he peers down at Jungkook through the wet strands falling over his eyes.

“You cheated."

“You were staring, so you didn’t see my right foot stepping forward and giving me a good anchor to quickly lunge at you,” Taehyung begins and calls Jungkook out at the same time. “You reflexively stepped back but it threw off your balance. It also made you unaware of the hand I was reaching toward you. Then all I had to do is grab you, trip you, and here we are now.”

Before Jungkook gets the chance to utter a well worded retort, Taehyung carries him bridal style. “Oh…” Jungkook flushes. “Why ar—”

Taehyung unceremoniously hauls Jungkook, this time not withholding his strength as Jungkook flies through the air with a yelp.

“You pri—” Jungkook’s words are swallowed by the water as he plummets into the plunge pool. When he emerges seconds later, it's with a glare and a noise of protest. “What if I couldn’t swim?!”

“Killing two birds with one stone,” Taehyung shrugs. It pulls on his shirt when he does, showing the shadows of abs.

Jungkook looks away, face heated. He swims to shore and pulls himself out of the water. His head turns, about to nag Taehyung’s ear off, however when he does, the expletive dies in his throat.

Taehyung is fiddling with the buckle of his cargo pants, then with the button.

Jungkook averts his gaze from the undressing man. “Why are you getting *naked*?”

“I’m not getting naked. I’m dressing down to my trunks, dumbass. You should too so we can dry our clothes.”

Jungkook mutely watches Taehyung slide off his shirt next, Taehyung soon left in only a black pair of swimming shorts similar to the one Jungkook has under his trousers. Meaning that Jungkook has a perfect, undisturbed view of Taehyung's exposed arms.

And chest.

The dragonborn is well-built, most likely due to him being a hunter and the other physical jobs Taehyung may be doing. Jungkook is well built too, perhaps a tad more than Taehyung, actually, but the latter makes up for it with his broader shoulders that roll when he squeezes the excess water off his shirt.

"If my scars bother you, you can look away. I'm not hiding them."

Jungkook blinks. "I wasn't looking at your scars at all."

"Right."

"I wasn't. I was looking at your chest, you idiot."

Taehyung crouches at the edge of the plunge pool, wringing his pants next. "What about it?" He asks and peers down at himself.

Jungkook rolls his eyes. "Foolish husband of mine... You're handsome. I told you before." Taehyung scoffs. "Is it really that impossible for you to accept that someone can find you attractive? Or be interested in you? Not that I am, but I do find you beautiful."

"I think I'm downright impossible to romantically love, which I'm fine with. It's not as though I want any of that anymore."

"You're not impossible to love."

"I'd beg to differ. I try to be better with my temper and... everything else," Taehyung dismisses with a wave, "but I'll always be the way I am to some extent. No one is gonna mold me into whatever tamed doll some people want me to be, and many people hate that."

"The way you are is exactly what makes you so interesting."

"Let's see how long it lasts. You might be the only one thinking that, aside from my family."

"I'd dislike you if you weren't the temperamental prick that you are," Jungkook jest, but he hopes that the honesty can be heard.

Taehyung glances at Jungkook before looking away.

"You don't believe anyone can be attracted to you?"

"It never crosses my mind because *I* don't find anyone attractive," Taehyung says, and Jungkook tucks every bit of knowledge he gains about Taehyung in this small box in his mind. "I can admit when someone is beautiful, but attraction is something else entirely. Plus— Whatever."

"You can tell me."

Taehyung doesn’t for a while, arms on his knees as he distantly stares at the plunge pool. Jungkook patiently waits.

“After what he did to me,” Taehyung resumes minutes later, “it’s especially hard to even begin to fathom the idea that a human can feel something for me other than hatred, selfish greed or all sorts of ill intentions. And I mean genuinely so. It’s like— Like my brain got completely fucked over six years ago. I guess that’s what happens when a fucking psycho is in love with you, huh? It’s just—” The muscles of his jaw shifting under his skin. “My mind can’t wrap around the possibility that someone, especially a human, can... I don’t know. Like me. Let alone be in love with me."

“Do you still think I have ill intentions toward you? That I’ll betray or use you?”

Taehyung’s response is prompt, even if it is candid and quiet.

“I don’t distrust you anymore.”

Relief rushes through Jungkook.

He had not realized how much he had needed to be the recipient of such words, how they smother the voice in his head.

“I’m glad.”

Their gazes find each other.

“I really am, Taehyung.”

Taehyung seems lighter as well after the admission, not as tense anymore.

“If I tell you that I like you as a friend, that I enjoy hanging out with you, do you believe me?”

Taehyung’s lips pinch into a thin line, his brows furrowing. Jungkook doesn’t know why, but his eyes prickle, his empathy seeming to grow and deepen whenever Taehyung is the recipient of it.

“No,” Taehyung rasps. He sounds ashamed.

“Are you willing to try believing me?”

Taehyung nods after a lull, and Jungkook smiles.

“That’s all that matters.”

“Is it?”

Taehyung’s tone reminds Jungkook of the discussion they had last night, where the dragonborn had sounded unusually insecure, such a dichotomy to how confident and brazen the dragonborn is.

“It is.”

Taehyung curtly nods. “You should get those clothes off before you catch a cold and whine about it.”

“I don't whine.” Jungkook fiddles with his harness but it has been fastened too tight, his grip also slippery with the impromptu bath he had taken. “Can you help me?”

“With what?”

“I can't remove the harness,” Jungkook says as Taehyung approaches him. Jungkook tries his best to keep his eye higher than Taehyung's collarbones.

“Why did you dress like that to begin with? I told you to wear something comfortable."

Jungkook turns around at Taehyung’s request. “I didn't think the date would include taking my clothes off. You hadn't told me anything, prick.” Jungkook ignores the *‘Dumbass’* Taehyung shoots back. “And it *is* comfortable.”

“Still.” Taehyung stands behind Jungkook and begins to tug and twist at the harness’ buckles. He clicks his tongue. “This fucking— What the fuck is that thing?”

“A harness.”

“Why would you wear a harness? It’s not like you’re about to ride on top of a dragon.”

“It’s an accessory.”

“Stupid accessory.”

“Can you shut up and remove it?”

“Watch your tone,” Taehyung tuts and Jungkook huffs a chuckle. He struggles with the buckles some more before saying “They’re too tight. What kind of bullshit is that? I don’t have the nails for this.”

“Neither do I.” Jungkook demonstrates to Taehyung how short his nails are by flipping him the bird.

Taehyung bats the hand away. “Fucking childish brat. It’ll be easier if I tear it off.”

Jungkook glares at Taehyung above his shoulder. “Don’t.”

“I’m tearing it off.”

“Don’t you dare, Kim Taehyung.”

“Full name, uh?”

“Don’t tear it off. I like it, and it was expensive.” Jungkook's grievance does border on a whine this time. It works, nonetheless, because Taehyung carries on with a grumble.

Jungkook feels the way Taehyung’s fingers brush against his waist as he manages to unfasten one of the buckles. The digits skid to the lower back, and Taehyung is close enough for Jungkook to hear his breathing, feel his presence and warmth.

This proximity feels like a serendipity.

Jungkook has never been happier to have impulsively bought the harness.

“This damn thing isn’t worth the hassle."

“I look good in it though."

Taehyung’s hum rumbles behind Jungkook.

“Do I?”

“Sure.”

“I thought you could admit when someone is beautiful, so why aren’t you with me?” Jungkook teases and turns his head.

Taehyung looks up at him as he detaches the last buckle and tosses the harness on the ground. “You’re beautiful.”

Jungkook becomes incredibly still, his gaze riveted on Taehyung who walks off with a sneeze that echoes through the cave. Heat blooms in Jungkook’s face, neck, chest and *everything,* really, as his body seemingly slowly evolves into one, gigantic blush.

“Oh my God.” Jungkook opts to remove his top to hide his face in the same process. “You can’t just say that.”

“You told me to admit it?”

“Just… Shut up.” Jungkook takes off his trousers, left in his dark trunks. He splashes his face with some water and when he looks up, he sees Taehyung making his way toward a tunnel near the waterfall. “Where are you going?!”

“Jumping,” Taehyung shouts back and disappears.

Jungkook races after him. “You want to jump from all the way up?”

The two of them climb a makeshift spiral series of stairs.

“Yup. Do you want to jump?”

“I don’t know.” Jungkook surveys the two, parallel scars marring Taehyung's shoulder blades. The pink skin looks rough and jagged. He has half a mind to touch them but reneges the thought as quickly as it had developed.

They reach the mouth of the waterfall where they stand at the edge of, the water rushing past their feet and falling into the plunge pool.

“Nevermind.” Jungkook swirls around and is about to vacate this hellish cascade at once, however Taehyung grabs his arm and brings him to his side again. “I’m not jumping.”

“It looks higher than what it is.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Jungkook doesn’t mean for it to come out as sassy as it does but he can’t reign in his growing agitation. “What if there’s a sharp rock at the bottom and I impale myself on it

then bleed out to death while drowning?”

Taehyung’s face morphs into a confused grimace. “Why do you always assume shit like that?”

“Because it’s a possibility. I’m not jumping.”

“Alright.” Taehyung lets go of Jungkook and crouches to wet his nape. “You can climb down then.” He combs his hands through his locks, tossing his head back to push his hair out of the way. Droplets trickle down his throat, some sliding past the collarbones and pecs.

Jungkook’s neck cracks when he jerks his head away from the sight Taehyung makes. “I think I want to try but… It’s scary,” he says, dizzied from simply estimating how far the water is from him. “Can I hold your hand?”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“No.”

“Please? I want to jump but not on my own.”

“Holding hands while jumping into a pool is *exactly* what can make it dangerous. If only one jumps, then the other is dragged and it can result in a bad fall.”

“I’ll jump if you hold my hand.”

Taehyung scrutinizes Jungkook. He rolls his eyes seconds later, then he roughly grabs Jungkook’s hand. Taehyung’s palm is callous in some parts, yet warm and secure, and when Jungkook intertwines their fingers together, Taehyung says naught.

“Are you sure?”

Jungkook nods, stepping closer to him.

“That wasn’t a yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“Last time I ask: are you sure?”

Jungkook chuckles, both pleased and soothed by Taehyung’s insistence. “Yes. I’m sure.”

“We jump at one.”

“Okay."

“Still sure?”

“Yes.” Jungkook squeezes Taehyung’s hand.

“Three… Two… One.”

Jungkook and Taehyung both leap.

A strangled noise escapes Jungkook’s mouth. Regret immediately sets into him as he hovers in the air before falling down. He closes his eyes, pinching his nose with his free hand while his other one tightens around Taehyung’s.

They plunge through the water earlier than Jungkook anticipated. His grip falters around Taehyung when they come into contact with the water, however Taehyung’s does not, and he swims up to the surface, pulling Jungkook with him.

Jungkook gasps. “Oh my God.” He peers at Taehyung. “Oh my God! That actually wasn’t that bad?!”

“I told you,” Taehyung says and releases Jungkook.

“No, no, wait.” Jungkook scurries to encircle Taehyung’s neck. “My legs are jelly,” he mumbles, his chest brushing against Taehyung’s back. It’s a little selfish when he props his chin on Taehyung’s shoulder. “Swim me back.”

Taehyung does without contest.

“I want to jump again," Jungkook announces.

His and Taehyung’s face are quite close from how he’s clinging onto the dragonborn swimming them to ground, so when Taehyung’s head slightly twists to peer at Jungkook, the tip of Jungkook’s nose grazes Taehyung’s cheek.

“Sure,” is all that Taehyung says.

And so they jump again minutes later, this time Jungkook being the one to initiate the hand holding. Taehyung does not reject it. When Jungkook asks if holding his hand is a burden, Taehyung says *'No'* then adds a firm *‘You’re not’* that leaves no place for debate, and so Jungkook doesn’t argue.

Jungkook doesn’t believe Taehyung, but he still grins, happiness swelling within him.

They jump a third then a fourth time and more.

Jungkook doesn’t really want to at some point, however jumping equals holding Taehyung’s hand for free, and so the two of them continue to leap from the waterfall until they’ve both had enough.

Half an hour later, Jungkook and Taehyung are dried and lounging on the blankets.

Taehyung is carving again, hunched over himself, a concentrated frown etching his face. His hair is slicked back but there’s a rebellious strand of hair dangling in front of his forehead. Jungkook stares again, because that’s the normal and expected thing to do when one is married to a husband as gorgeous as Taehyung is.

Taehyung isn’t wearing any shirt as well, the two of them left in their swimming shorts. It offers Jungkook free reign to ogle Taehyung. His interesting, powerful *husband*. The same one that is huffing and puffing at the miniature creature he’s sculpting with an impressive dexterity.

Taehyung is endearing on top of being fun, eons away from the other men he had been forced to consider.

Jungkook's former suitors — whether human or dragonborn — had all been old, hideous and horrifyingly dull. Jungkook had had to grit his teeth together and plaster a fabricated smile on his face to veil his repulsion. He had stopped hoping to marry a young man that would slot into his tastes and what little criteria he would have liked to see in his husband.

All until Taehyung had barged into his life with a fierce personality, refreshing honesty and compelling *everything.*

Taehyung flicks his tools on the blanket along with the unfinished turtle figurine. He slumps on his back, an arm slung over his chest and the other draped over his face.

“I can’t believe you’ve been breaking a sweat over carving a tiny turtle.”

“It’s hard work. Don’t judge.”

Jungkook isn’t judging. He’s shamelessly surveying the expense of Taehyung’s chest that is shining from a faint sheen. “If you’re taking a break now, do you want to check out the necromancy book?”

Taehyung perks up. “Let’s.”

Jungkook takes out the book.

The tome is still the same as before, the front and back cover in jet black, the parchment pages blank.

Taehyung shuffles near Jungkook. “Have you found anything?”

“I had forgotten about it. It wasn’t in my mind at all.”

“You should try to use your flames on it first.”

“I was thinking the same.” Jungkook summons his arcane, his flames next that he envelops the book with. He opens it to the front page where he presses his palm but nothing occurs.

He and Taehyung hum at the same time.

“Respira? Respira, anima noctis?” Still naught. Jungkook crosses his arms over his chest. Irritation flickers in him.

“We’ll figure it out. Do you feel anything from it?”

“It definitely has necromancy," Jungkook says, relaxing at Taehyung's poise. "I can sense it, but we don’t know what it needs to be activated, if it works like that.”

“Blood.”

Jungkook gawks at Taehyung.

“Maybe it needs your blood.”

“Are you *insane?* I’m not potentially binding myself with whatever this book is. I could die, Taehyung. Or worse. Probably worse considering that it’s a book of necromancy.”

“I’m just saying that blood is an option. Like you said, it is related to necromancy."

It makes sense, and now Jungkook is curious. “What if it frees a deadly creature that tries to murder us?”

“We tame it. If we can’t: we kill it.”

There’s a resolute assurance in the way Taehyung says ‘we’, and in the trust he appears to put in both his and Jungkook’s abilities.

Jungkook preens a little, because he’s ridiculous like that.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Jungkook reaches for the knife he had used to cut the melia. “The last time I used my blood on something arcanic, Revna arrived.”

“Uh?”

“Long story short, Seohyung and Sungmin had found an arcanic scroll that couldn’t be opened. So I got curious.”

“Of course you did.”

Jungkook slaps Taehyung’s knees. “I stole the scroll and took it with me. I tripped while running away and spilled some drops of my blood on the paper, and that’s when the ruby appeared, then Revna.”

“You’re *actually* bonded to her.”

“Probably, yeah?”

“The scroll had necromancy in it?”

“Not that I know of? It was gone when the ruby was there.”

Taehyung hums. “You should really try using your blood.”

“That’s so risky…”

“Yeah, it is.”

A silence passes between them.

They peer at each other at the same time.

“But it’s kinda exciting,” Jungkook snickers and Taehyung mirrors Jungkook’s enthusiasm with an amused huff.

“It fucking is.”

“Okay, okay, I’m doing it.” Jungkook places the tip of the sharp blade on the pulp of his index finger. “Have my back just in case. God... Imagine if we had known each other when we were

young," Jungkook blurts out and Taehyung emits a noncommittal sound. "We would have gotten into so much trouble all the time."

"It's never too late to experience a lost childhood."

Jungkook laughs.

His hands hover above the opened book. He nips at the skin of his index, a bead of blood forming there. The carmine drop falls a second later, splattering across the page.

Jungkook buzzes with anticipation, however he subdues when nothing occurs.

"Well… That was anticlimat—"

Jungkook never finishes his sentence, interrupted by the book that slams shut.

Then, the book *levitates* in front of Jungkook.

Jungkook scrambles on his feet, Taehyung too. "I told you it was a bad idea."

"By the Elders."

"I can't believe it actually worked."

"I can," Taehyung says, his eyes riveted on the arcanic book.

"Don't look so thrilled," Jungkook exclaims, his own eagerness betrayed in his voice. "What if I really bonded myself to something?!"

"It's not my fault."

"You coerced me!"

"I didn't?! You chose on your own!"

"You influenced me."

"Oh so you're back to being bendy now?"

"I'm not bendy, you—"

A gust thrusts at Jungkook with so much force that he has to hold onto Taehyung to not be hurled across the room. Wind billows inside the cave, loudly rustling through the meliacitrea's leaves and butterflies' wings.

Taehyung curves an arm over Jungkook's chest, tucking him further behind him. He lifts his other arm to shield his face from the pebbles and dust the wind carries toward them. "If anything happens, you run. Got it?"

Jungkook nods. "We have the bracelets."

The whirlwind suddenly stops, and the book drops.

A stillness befalls inside the cave.

It stretches for so long that their stances relax, although still wary. Taehyung's arm is still slung over Jungkook's chest, the fingers tightened at the waist, and so Jungkook slides a hand around Taehyung's arm.

"I really hope we're not about to die while we're wearing swimming shorts."

Taehyung's mouth twitches upward.

Cracks erupt from the book. The leather peels from the case and rests limply on the grass. The pages all separate from the spine one after another, each one of them disintegrating to dust into a growing pile resembling sand.

Jungkook's instincts speak, and he listens.

He summons his flames anew to let them mingle with what had once been a book. The piece of black leather floats in the air while the 'sand' of the pages swirls around. The dust coalesces, becoming more dense and solid. It creates a shape, elongated and thin, round at both ends. Similar objects continue to form from the dust.

They're bones, Jungkook realizes with muted fascination.

"Fucking hell..."

The bones fly toward each other and adhere together.

Soon enough, some kind of round ribcage is built in front of Jungkook and Taehyung, followed by the bones of a tail, all deprived of any skin or flesh. It has a large pair of skeletal wings attached at the back of the spine. The leather that had covered the book stretches across the span of the wing's bones, serving as skin.

The skull resembles one of a bear, except that it has a series of beige horns along the bridge of where the nose would be. A pair of antlers is fastened atop the scalp, and two raven lanterns sway from the right antler, while a third lantern does on the left one.

The ribcage and its skull are so small that they could easily fit in Jungkook's palm, a stark contrast to the size of the wings that would be big enough to support the weight of an adult human.

"Holy fucking shit," Taehyung blurts out. "What the fuck is that thing?"

Jungkook deeply resonates with Taehyung's expletives.

He stares at the creature — if it is one. He can't sense any lost soul in it. He squints at the jaws where teeth and fangs protrude.

Something is held between them.

Jungkook steps forward but Taehyung's arm tenses to stop him.

"There's something in its mouth," Jungkook explains. "I should be the one to take it just in case."

Taehyung eventually lowers his arm. "Fine."

Jungkook's tattooed hand inches toward the tiny skull. He carefully pinches the rolled piece of paper its holding, slowly plucking it out from the mouth. A hand gets a hold of Jungkook's elbow, guiding him away from the still floating creature, the wings batting up and down.

"Don't stay so close. You don't know what it can do."

"But this might." Jungkook brandishes the paper. He unfolds it.

To the (un?)fortunate reader of this scroll: congratulations!

You are survivors of the purge against our kind: necromancers. The world has never understood us — or death, for that matter. Living beings endowed with intelligence never fail to fear what they do not comprehend.

If you have found my tome… Well. You must know by now that it is more than a simple book. It is one of my creations born from what had once been a dear familiar of mine. However the shape of a book is a lot more inconspicuous than one of the peculiar creatures you have just befriended!

You may be curious about this tiny little gremlin.

A long shortened story would be that it can grant three wishes. Kind of. Not a wish to be rich or any of that mundane gibberish.

The wish has to be related to necromancy.

You would like to be guided toward an Anima? Wish for it, and the creature will fly to it. You would like to steal the Anima of a living being? Wish away! You want to transfer into a new vessel a loved one's Anima? Wish wish wish! You want to find a powerful Anima to help you govern the world? You are one wish away from being King or Queen.

However, necromancy, unlike many other arcanes, has a cost.

The first wish reduces the necromancer's lifespan by ten years. The second wish reduces it by twenty years. The third and last wish reduces it by thirty years.

Is power worth losing time? Is a loved one's life worth losing yours? Is an Anima worth saving?

It is quite the conundrum, is it not? I am certain you must be mulling over what decision to make, what sacrifice to give, and what wish to utter.

Nevertheless, you have fed my friend with your blood. It is now yours to command until someone else does.

In order to use this creature, and for the wish and cost to be given, you must accept to bond yourself to it by reading the vows out loud.

I know. I know…

It's scary, isn't it? Trusting the words of a complete stranger promising so much greatness? All because of some old, dirty scribbles on a paper?

However, you must be wondering. I know I would.

I know you are.

"Is it true?"

"What if this?"

"What if that?"

You may wonder "But! Stranger! How can I be certain of what will occur after pronouncing the vows?" And I will answer…

You won't know until you try it!

Now, onto the vows!

They must be read out loud, clear and perfectly articulated.

Repeat after me…

"What's an Anima?" Taehyung asks.

"I think they mean lost souls."

"Oh."

It's the first time Jungkook ever comes into contact with another necromancer, even if through a piece of parchment.

"You're alright?"

Jungkook nods. "Yes, sorry. It's—" He wipes his eyes and clears his throat. "It's a little lonely. To have never met any other necromancer, and technically it's a simple piece of paper so it's not even someone that is actually here, but it's still something, you know?"

"There's got to be more than one necromancer in the world. You're not that unique," Taehyung says, playful, drawing a smile out of Jungkook. "We'll find them."

"Yeah." Jungkook sniffles and swiftly changes the uncomfortable subject. "So… The wishes are interesting, but the consequences are pretty bad."

"*'Pretty bad'* is a mild way to put it."

"It could be useful. Perhaps with the plague."

Taehyung snatches the paper from Jungkook. "You are *not* reducing your lifespan for that. The plague can be figured out through other means. Plus we don't even know if what is said is true."

Jungkook does not respond, smiling to himself. "Does it say anything about bringing it back to its book form?" He shuffles closer to Taehyung as the latter turns the parchment, some writing at the back as well.

Jungkook surveys Taehyung, curious and testing.

He holds onto Taehyung's arm who doesn't seem to care about the proximity. Jungkook stays. He peers over Taehyung's shoulder to read the instructions.

“*‘I know my little friend can be quite the eye attraction, hence its book form that you can change it into by saying ‘You may dust away.’*” Taehyung pauses. “That’s so fucking stupid.”

“You may dust away."

The creature immediately falls to dust, the page in Taehyung’s hand as well. The sand of the paper, and leather of the wings and skull all withdraw together, reforming the book that closes shut on its own.

Neither Taehyung or Jungkook speak for a while, both staring at the now mundane looking tome.

Then, they both break into an excited chatter.

“I can’t believe this just happened.”

“Me either.”

“Is it alive?”

“I have no fucking clue.”

“Oh my God.”

“What?”

“What if it needs food?”

“Feed it your blood.”

A smack resounds in the cave.

"Shut up."

"Or Revna," Taehyung snorts.

"I'll tell her you said that."

"Wait. No. Don't."

Jungkook snickers.

“By the Elders… That was fucking mental.” Taehyung walks toward the book, bringing Jungkook along who's still holding onto him. Taehyung takes the book and skims through the blank pages. “Arcane is so damn amazing. Imagine how boring the world would be without it? I don’t know how humans do it and I don’t want to know.”

Jungkook laughs at the childlike excitement in Taehyung’s voice. “Revna will keep the book in the ruby, but we’ll have to tell her what it is first.”

“How does that even work?”

“The ruby?” Jungkook says and Taehyung nods. “It works like another dimension. Revna told me everything is red there, and that there’s a ground and sky, kind of? She said the ground feels like a cloud but she can still move and leave things on it without them falling through. Revna can bring

anything with her that isn't too big and that she can carry, like a pillow for example, or books, blankets and whatnot, but she wouldn't be able to bring a couch or someone with her".

"Makes sense. The ruby is small."

"Can you not tell anyone about the book? I think it's better if we keep that between us. If we have to use a wish for some reason, I don't want anyone to know I lost years of my lifespan."

"Lying about something like this will come around to bite you in the ass."

"I can handle that."

"We'll have to summon it to its ribcage form or whatever the fuck that is when we're back home, so we can study it a little better."

Jungkook is about to respond when his gaze drifts on Taehyung's shoulders. The two large scars are of a deep pink, a lot more than before. "Your scars are really red."

Taehyung's body tenses. "'cause they hurt. Sometimes they just… flare up. I'm used to it. Careful with the book. Tell me if anything weird happens with it."

Taehyung strides away from Jungkook to halt at the cliff where the entrance to the cave is. He quite literally *lifts a boulder* that he props on his shoulder. The large rock sinks into the grass when he drops it in front of the heap of blanket that has been tousled by the wind. After grabbing his carving tools, Taehyung plops next on a pillow next to the boulder and gets to work, his back to Jungkook.

Jungkook refocuses his attention on his task rather than on the fact that his husband has lifted *a boulder.*

After rearranging the blankets into the mattress it had been before, Jungkook rummages through the basket Junhyun had given them. He plucks a pouch from it and pries it open.

A plethora of gauze, pomades and vials are in it.

"Your father added a med kit as well."

"Sounds like him."

Jungkook finds a small jar with a beige ointment in it. "I think this can help with the aching in your scars, no?" He shows the jar to Taehyung whose head twists around.

"Yeah, but it's not like I can reach my own shoulder blades."

"I can do it for you."

Taehyung becomes so impossibly still that Jungkook worries Taehyung may not be breathing anymore.

Jungkook watches how Taehyung rolls his shoulders, his muscles tense before loosening, only to tighten up again.

Taehyung is quiet for a while, long enough for Jungkook to understand that his proposal has been rejected.

Jungkook stores the jar back in the picnic hamper.

He isn't annoyed or upset at the denial. He understands the complexity behind scars: how they can be shameful for some people, or a testimony of strength for others. He knows their presence can make one feel vulnerable.

Jungkook has an inkling that Taehyung experiences a bit of everything at once.

Jungkook busies himself with the wishing book that he glides over while Taehyung carves. His gaze keeps darting on Taehyung's back.

The scars grow into an angry red the more time trickles by.

There's an unfamiliar tug in Jungkook's chest that he tries to subdue to no avail.

Jungkook always yearns to help people. Caring for others is lovely, and it especially is with Taehyung in a singular way Jungkook can't put his finger on. It shushes Jungkook's mind that can sometimes be too loud.

It puts his soul at peace.

There's a selfless part that prompts Jungkook to want to care for Taehyung, however there is also a selfish one: it's misplaced catharsis, and more importantly, it is eye opening. The way Taehyung allows himself to be helped and taken care of is an occurrence that Jungkook has never witnessed at home, let alone experienced first hand.

Jungkook wants to be cherished too, but he rarely — *never* — lets it happen. It's not safe to do so.

It's witnessed scars and relived nightmares. It's vulnerable and too much hope.

Jungkook hates this.

Because what if it's given to him then snatched away?

Or what if the scars that have marred Jungkook's own skin and mind are too heavy to carry for anyone other than him? Too hard to understand. Too difficult to heal.

Too much work.

Jungkook doesn't want to be a heavier burden. He doesn't want to chase away those he loves because his greed has become too much.

So instead, Jungkook tends to other people while making sure they don't have to worry about reciprocating it. It works. Most are none the wiser about the phantoms of his past haunting his mind days and nights.

However it's different with Taehyung.

The more Jungkook tends to Taehyung, the more he watches how Taehyung's family members embrace, love and protect each other; the more Jungkook sees that, perhaps, that there is nothing wrong with permitting someone else to take care of him. That doing so can be pleasant.

Safe.

Two or three hours pass in a serene quietude.

The butterflies' colors have darkened as night arrives, the pretty insects apparently sleeping. Most of the cozy and immediate light comes from the fruits casting their golden hue across the blankets.

The scars nearly look bloody with how scarlet they have gotten.

Taehyung keeps twisting this and that way.

Jungkook is about to speak, to offer his proposal once more, however Taehyung precedes him.

“Go ahead.”

Jungkook promptly closes the wishing book. He takes the jar from before and wordlessly walks toward Taehyung. He sits down behind him, feet tucked beneath him.

Taehyung is still carving, his sculpture close to completion, it seems.

Jungkook doesn't linger or delay his task by asking if Taehyung is certain. Instead, he scoops a knob of the ointment to smear it on the scar carved through the right shoulder blade.

Taehyung flinches but doesn't speak.

The skin is rough in some places, softer on others as the pulp of Jungkook’s index and middle fingers graze upon it. It’s rugged and also slightly caved at the center of the elongated slash, smaller scars engraved at the edges, as though blasted outward. Jungkook should find the scars horrifying, and he does, remembrance of Dohyun ripping Taehyung’s wings fresh in his mind.

However the scars of Taehyung’s wings are beautiful too, stretching along Taehyung’s shoulders who still remains strong.

Jungkook is quick with applying the pomade on the two scars.

However when he begins to massage the ointment into the skin, he’s slow and meticulous.

Jungkook's touches are gentle, full of a carefulness that he hopes to be soothing for Taehyung. He makes sure to not let his nails accidentally catch onto a jagged bump, and when Jungkook pays particular attention to an angry-looking spot, Taehyung exhales through his nose, the tenseness in his shoulders ebbing away at every graze of Jungkook’s fingers.

Taehyung’s posture is less strained as the calming effect of the pomade must take effect and hopefully abate the pain. He stops carving, pushing the tools to the side as he folds his arms on the boulder and slumps forward against it.

“Do you like your scars?” Jungkook's question is more of a murmur than anything else.

“I do,” Taehyung answers, equally quiet. “Because they show that I survived him.”

Jungkook smiles even if Taehyung can’t see him. “You did.” He’s greedy for proximity, and he allows himself to gorge onto the sliver of it Taehyung grants him as he continues his ministration, his thumbs rubbing up and down the narrowed ends of the two scars.

“Do you like yours?”

Jungkook pauses.

His jaw clenches as remembrances of Seungwon's 'discipline' flare in his mind.

"I'm indifferent to them," Jungkook opts to say, eager to divert the discussion away from his past. "I don't hate them. I don't like them. They're there."

"You survived too."

Jungkook peers at the back of Taehyung's head. "Yes... I have."

Taehyung doesn't ask for more.

Jungkook resumes his massage that soon turns into delicate caresses, yet Taehyung never pushes him away.

Even when Jungkook lightens the pressure of his fingers, trailing them along the rough and jagged skin, or on a softer area that pebbles around a repressed shiver. A tilde of goosebumps runs through Jungkook's arms in response to Taehyung's, crawling up his nape even if he is not the one being touched.

Jungkook's chest buzzes with contentment, his greed fleetingly satiated.

Jungkook hums a melody to himself, a lullaby he had learned from a grandmother he had met when he would visit Amaris' streets. He doesn't miss the Citadel or Amaris in itself, but he misses his people. He wants to visit them again soon.

A welcomed somnolence coddles around Jungkook's mind, his movements slowing down, the voice ushered to muteness.

Jungkook isn't certain of how much time has passed when he stops. He wants this moment to last longer. He wants to bathe more in the fragile tranquility that has wrapped around them.

He wants and wants and wants.

Yet Jungkook withdraws his hands, folding them on his lap.

But maybe…

Maybe Taehyung wouldn't mind, if Jungkook is to take a little more from him. Just this one time.

"Taehyung," Jungkook starts and glances at Taehyung, voice a bit strained from apprehension and reserve, "is it okay if I apply a second laye—"

The rest of Jungkook's query falls mute.

Taehyung's head is turned to the side, cheek resting against his arm and chest slowly heaving up and down. His eyes are closed.

Taehyung is asleep.

Taehyung has fallen asleep while *Jungkook* was touching his scars.

“I don’t distrust you anymore.”

Jungkook is overcome with relief first, as Taehyung unknowingly proves his own words. Then surprise is next because Taehyung is asleep. Finally, Jungkook raises a hand to muffle the sound of happiness that catches in his throat.

He rises on his knees to have a better view of Taehyung's face.

Taehyung's hair is messier and wavier than usual, draped over his cheek and forehead while curling at the nape, and slow puffs of air slip from his parted lips.

Jungkook sits back down, his gaze riveted on Taehyung. His fists ball up on his thighs to repress the urge to touch Taehyung. He gnaws on the inside of his cheek. He leans forward, a little closer to Taehyung again. He extends a hand but promptly retracts it before it reaches Taehyung’s hair.

Jungkook does this a few more times, feeling ridiculous at the way his hesitation and impulse clash together.

He rubs his palms over his face.

He tries another time.

His trembling hand inches near the sleeping dragonborn. The tip of his fingers graze over the raven strands that are so, *so soft*.

Jungkook breathes out a mute *‘Oh’*.

Then, he cards his hand through Taehyung’s hair so very gently, right above the ear that shines with the three silver hoops hooked through it.

Jungkook has never been this close to boys when he had been younger, or men when he had gotten older. It's the most intimate he has ever been with anyone, and the fact that it happens with his husband, with a man so compelling and beautiful, only serves to heighten Jungkook's curiosity.

His fingers comb a second time, eager to feel the silky lock again, however his index accidentally bumps against the apple of Taehyung’s cheek in his rush.

Jungkook’s hand jerks away.

He touched Taehyung’s face .

And Jungkook hides his own in the crook of his elbows, skin warm and heart wildly beating in his chest.

He can’t believe he's done this, no matter how accidental it may have been, but the hair combing *had* been purposeful.

God.

Jungkook touched a handsome man's face. Even *played with his hair.*

Jungkook scrambles to grab the pot of pomade so that he’s not betrayed by his treacherous hands once more. He glances up, and a noise akin to the one of a dying animal gets trapped in his mouth when Taehyung’s head lifts, his bleary gaze settling on Jungkook.

“What’s going on?” Taehyung mumbles.

“Nothing!” Jungkook averts his eyes. “Do you want a second layer of the ointment?”

“M'fine.”

“Okay.” Jungkook closes the lid but he’s flustered *and* ashamed at his misconduct, so his fingers are clumsy. He startles when Taehyung takes the jar from him to twist the lid shut.

Taehyung turns and stands to disappear out of Jungkook’s view.

Jungkook remains where he is. He needs a moment to process all that has occurred.

He feels a light pull on the hair at the back of his head that he tilts backward.

He's immediately greeted by Taehyung who’s standing behind Jungkook, left hand in his pants’ pocket, the other one holding onto one of Jungkook’s strands in a gesture so casual yet so *new* and intimate that Jungkook does not dare move.

If Jungkook’s skin hadn't been lit aflame before, it certainly is when Taehyung rests the back of a hand above Jungkook’s forehead.

“If you’re getting sick, say it.”

“I’m not getting sick."

Taehyung flicks a zap at Jungkook’s forehead. “Could’ve fooled me."

Jungkook rises to his feet and dutifully ignores Taehyung as he makes his way up the mattress of blankets. He stays in his trunks but he retrieves one of the spare blankets to throw it over himself and, hopefully, make his existence be forgotten by the dragonborn.

Something nudges his back.

“The fuck is wrong with you.”

“I said nothing."

Taehyung hums, silent for a moment, then he says “Surely, this isn’t because you touched my hair.”

Jungkook jolts upward. “You were awake?!”

“This is what woke me up in the first place,” Taehyung answers, leisurely munching on a piece of melia.

Jungkook’s palms plaster against his face. “I’m so sorry. I just... had... an urge."

“An urge to touch my hair.”

“It always looks soft and— And I got curious.”

“So you took advantage of me being asleep to touch my hair.”

Oh my God.

“Oh my God,” Jungkook echoes. “I did. I'm so, so sorry. I really didn’t mean to, I just got really curious and I shouldn’t have done that. Like. Even if you let me put the pomade on your scars that doesn’t mean it extends to your hair, right, because maybe your hair is your boundary and people have different boundaries so I really shouldn’t have—” His tirade falters when a chuckle floats in the air.

“I’m fucking with you.”

Jungkook peeks through his fingers, and he only notices the upward tilt to Taehyung's lips, or the amusement that dances in his eyes.

Taehyung is smiling at Jungkook.

At Jungkook *only*.

No Jimin is here to make a funny joke, no contagious laughter from Seokjin, no quip from Hoseok. There’s only Jungkook and Taehyung, and Jungkook has made Taehyung smile.

Jungkook’s lids flutter, the warmth of the blush that must be rosy on his skin spreading through his chest, neck and face. He lowers his hands to place them against his mouth as he stares up at Taehyung, feeling oddly shy beneath the dragonborn's attention.

Jungkook’s eyes close when his cheeks bunch up. “I got worried I messed up,” he says, but it sounds more like a happy complaint because of the audible grin in his voice that grows when Taehyung's own smile widens.

“It’s just hair,” Taehyung chuckles.

Again.

“You’re mean.”

“Tormenting you is a hobby of mine.”

Jungkook reduces the distance between the two of them. A plucks a diced piece of melia from Taehyung's bowl. “You’re a prick.”

“I know."

“Does that mean I can touch your hair again?” Jungkook blurts out before he can stop himself.

He shouldn’t have done that.

Exasperation at himself dampens Jungkook's cheerful mood

“Don’t push it," Taehyung says, but it sounds playful.

It immediately eases Jungkook’s irritation. “That wasn’t a no.”

“You can touch my hair once per month for half a second.”

“You’re annoying, you know that?”

“And I bask in it.”

Jungkook laughs. The constant itchy swoop in his chest returns, bubbling with glee.

Taehyung lays down at some point, and Jungkook joins him, reclining against the tree trunk.

Jungkook marvels at the sight before and above him, then he admires another kind of beauty when he glances down at Taehyung who lays on his side, back to Jungkook.

Another token.

Taehyung folds his arms under his head, the lower part of his face nestled in the crook of his elbows, and he closes his eyes with a deep exhalation.

“Does earlier count for the monthly touch?” Jungkook questions.

A beat of silence passes.

“No."

Jungkook catches onto the underlying permission. He does not hesitate when he cards the pulp of his fingers through Taehyung’s soft locks.

“It’s been more than half a second,” Taehyung remarks minutes later.

Jungkook hums but doesn’t say more. He tucks a strand behind Taehyung’s ear, then he combs through the hair at the crown, his nails gently grazing the scalp. Touching Taehyung this way feels as though someone is doing the same to Jungkook. Jungkook can only imagine how good it must feel to be the recipient of something like this.

Taehyung appears to fall asleep under Jungkook's ministrations, his breathing slow and steady.

“Is it a burden if I touch your hair?”

Jungkook does not expect an answer to his whispered question, assuming that the dragonborn is lost between Morpheus’s arms, yet he receives one.

“You’re not.”

Jungkook hears the words. He doesn’t believe them, but he listens.

Chapter End Notes

So 🥸 Don’t expect another long chapter like this one and I really mean it this time XDDD I really have to shorten my chapters to between 10k/12k because otherwise they take too long to write and keeping the weekly schedule will be impossible and pressuring for me 😭 And I think we’d all prefer weekly chapters 🫶🤍

I hope you enjoyed this one though hehe I'm very nervous about it for some reasons T___T, Taekook’s date shall continue in chapter 18!!

Anyway enough babbling 💀 I know I say that every time but thank you so, SO MUCH for your comments :((I really hope you know the amount of serotonin your comments give me and how rewarding they are, I always reread them a lot so thank you very very much T_____T 🤍🤍🤍

PS: the meliacitreas and the butterflies are completely invented by me 👍

❧ Twitter

— Chapter’s visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH17.

The sweater Jungkook stole from Taehyung
Jungkook's outfit for the date
Taehyung's outfit for the date
The tunnels
The cave and the tree
The waterfall
A summersweet butterfly
What the heap of blankets/pillows looks like (pretend that the sheets surrounding the bed and above it aren't there)

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Taekook in the cave's pool made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Jungkook with the butterflies made by sunkjjk
❧ Art of Revna made by taekoorkive

❧ Moodboard of Yoonmin made by yanira_moreira
❧ A moodboard made by MoonloveTK
❧ Two Taekook moodboards made by 97II94

Chapter 18: An Interlude's Closure

Chapter Summary

Jungkook and Taehyung talk, and talk, and talk some more.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy Taekook's unhinged discussions 👍🤍

Cw:

1) past child abuse, nothing graphic at all in terms of physical abuse, it's mostly emotional abuse
2) emotional child abuse
3) slight and brief anxiety attack

If you want to skip the first two content warnings, you can skip the whole part that is italicized at the beginning of this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snap.

The sound of a breaking bone resounds between Jungkook's ears.

Next is a muffled scream, trailed by blood dripping down.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

Thud.

The pair of wings are on the ground. Taehyung is too, writhing, his fingers clutching at his chest where blood is oozing from, tainting the shirt in carmine, then the grass, the sky.

Soon, all Jungkook sees is red.

The pain feels present yet distant at the same time, like one felt in the past, whose memory he experiences anew.

“Fucking freak of a warlock. Not even worth being my doll.”

Jungkook wants to stand and kill Seungwon, however he can’t move, paralyzed where he’s kneeling on the ground.

The scenery changes.

It morphs into a bedroom with a bathroom adjacent to it.

A sink’s pipe.

The citadel.

Jungkook races out of his bedroom.

His pants are wet. He has wet his bed again. He tries not to, he really does, but he had been so terrified.

The nights are lonely. And scary. Sometimes he wakes up and there’s a person or more in his bedroom that aren’t the maids, but in moments like those, he’s so frightened that he can’t budge a limb, and he ends up falling back asleep.

He has told his parents about it. However his father is busy, and his mother doesn’t like being disturbed. She says that Jungkook should never be difficult to handle, so Jungkook does his best to not be a burden to his parents and his entourage even if he fails every now and then.

He’s a big boy.

But tonight, he doesn’t feel like a big boy.

He tries to run as fast as he can but it feels like his short legs don’t carry him away quick enough from the man in his bedroom.

The man had been headless, standing at the foot of Jungkook's bed when he had woken up to feeling a presence in the room, and eyes on him.

Tears are streaming down Jungkook’s face now, cold against his skin as he dashes through the corridors. He wants to scream for help but his throat is clogged up.

He soon reaches his parents’ bedroom door. It’s locked when he tries to open it, as it always is. Jungkook yanks on the handle, slamming his small fists against the door. This time, wails escape his mouth while he cries for his mother and father.

A click erupts and the door is yanked open.

Jungkook looks up at his mother. He bursts into tears, his cries rattling his body.

“Your father and I are sleeping,” Seohyung snips and closes the door behind her.

Jungkook makes a move to enter the bedroom but he's roughly pushed back by his mother, harsh enough for his already wobbling legs to cave under his weight. "I'm sorry," he says in between two whimpers. "I'm scared."

"Is this about one of your foolish nightmares again?" Seohyung says with a venom that Jungkook flinches at. "I warned you to not wake us up. You are seven years old. You can handle them on your own."

"S'not a nightmare." Jungkook does his best to keep his tears at bay, memories of his mother's lessons fresh in his mind.

"Then what?"

Jungkook hesitates. He doesn't want to anger his mother any further. He doesn't like it when she's angry, but he's so terrified, and he doesn't want to go back to his bedroom alone. "T—There's a man. In my—my bedroom."

"Again with this inane nonsense."

"I swear. There's someone. I—I promise. I saw him."

Seohyung smiles.

She crouches in front of Jungkook. "Really?"

Jungkook nods. He's glad that his mother isn't mad anymore. He knew she would believe him this time. "Really."

"Show me, then."

Jungkook nods once more and rises on his shaky legs. His mother presents him her hand that he takes and squeezes.

She doesn't squeeze back.

His body still hiccups under his quietened sobs but he rapidly wipes his tears and snot with the sleeve of his shirt. He has been told countless times to never cry in front of others, that being vulnerable with other people is bad. Jungkook doesn't really understand what 'vulnerable' means, but his mother told him that vulnerability is when someone is weak, and Jungkook doesn't want to be weak.

Princes aren't weak.

They reach the door to Jungkook's bedroom a few minutes later.

Jungkook doesn't want to go in. He's scared. Thankfully his mother is here to protect him, and she's pulling him inside anyway when he freezes in the corridor.

Lanterns and candles are lit inside the bedroom.

"T—There." Jungkook points at the end of the bed. The man with the head is gone, but he swears he can still feel his gaze on him. Maybe he's in the closet? "There was a man. Here. He didn't have

a head and—and he was talking to me and—" He gasps when he's thrown at the foot of the bed. He turns around on his knees. He shrinks under the fury that paints his mother's face. "Mo—"

"You have lied to me."

"I didn't! I didn't lie, I promise I di—"

"Do not, raise your voice at me."

The tears sting in Jungkook's eyes. He sits more proper, legs folded under him. "M'not lying. There was… There was a man, Mom, I—"

"Do not call me that. You are not my son."

"But—"

Jungkook falls quiet when Seohyung begins to walk around the bedroom. She grabs the lanterns one after another, snuffing their light out. Jungkook is confused when she opens one of the windows and tosses the lanterns outside, shattering sounds of metal and glasses erupting in the garden.

"A prince is not afraid of the dark. A prince does not cry, whine or wail like a sniveling child," Seohyung starts and the candles are next, snapped in half and thrown out the window. "A prince overcomes his fears."

"I'm trying," Jungkook whispers. "I am. I really am. I'm sorry. M'really trying."

"You are not." Seohyung grabs Jungkook's arm and hauls him on his feet. She glances at him, a grimace etching her face. "You look like a mess." She drags Jungkook behind her, the two of them making their way toward the bathroom. She releases her hold to close the small windows shut.

Jungkook jolts at the loud noises.

The binds are next, entirely blocking what sliver of moonlight seeping inside the room.

"You will stay here—"

"No! No, no, no, please. P—Please," Jungkook begs and clutches onto his mother's pajama pants. He tries to not cry but he can't repress the drops that trickle down his cheeks. "Please, don't lea—"

Seohyung bats Jungkook's hand away with a twist of her mouth. "Do not touch me." She grabs the collar of his shirt to tug him near the bathtub. "Sit."

Jungkook obeys and settles down in front of the tub.

"M—Mom, please, I'm sorry. Won't happen a—again. I promise, Mom, I'll—"

"I am not! Your mother! How many times will I have to tell you!"

Jungkook flinches and curls into himself, pressing his palms against his ears.

"Stupid, foolish child. Good for nothing. Not even sleeping," Seohyung says with a chuckle.

It hurts Jungkook for some reason. He doesn't understand what is funny.

“God knows I wonder every day that passes why we have kept you. Bastard child. Worthy of nothing yet still bothering my sleep. You damn pest.”

“I didn’t m—mean to, I was scared. So scared. M’sorry.”

“Princes aren’t scared. Princes do not wake up their mother because of an absurd nightmare. Do you understand, Jungkook?” Seohyung asks, but Jungkook doesn’t know if it’s one of those questions he’s not supposed to answer. “Of course not. Stupid child. You will understand. With time.”

She begins to walk away, the bathroom plunged in the dark, the sole light coming from the opened door.

Jungkook scrambles up. “No. No, please.” He holds onto the back of her robe but she pushes him away. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Do not touch me with your vile hands.” Seohyung tries to leave again but Jungkook clings onto her, crying out for his mother to help him. “You are not my son!”

Jungkook ignores the nails that bite into his skin when she attempts to pull him off of her. He cries harder, unable to stop the sobs that snatch the air from his lungs and make him dizzy. “Don’t want to b—be alone. Mom. P—Please. I’m sorry, s’ry, d—don’t leave me alone.”

“Fine. Have it your way.”

Seohyung walks back inside the bedroom. Jungkook trips on his knees at the sudden movement. She leaves the area, disappearing inside the corridor.

Jungkook does not budge. He waits for his mother. He knows she’ll come back. She’s angry because he woke her up so late at night. He shouldn't have done that.

His mother does come back a couple minutes later, and relief swells in Jungkook.

She’s holding the belt of her silky robe that must have fallen while they had been on their way here. She grabs Jungkook again, leading him inside the bathroom again.

“Sit."

Jungkook promptly does.

He watches with utter confusion the way Seohyung fastens the belt around his wrists, the fabric soft. He’s sitting at the bottom of the sink on the ground, and his arms are lifted when Seohyung pulls them near the sink’s pipe where she ties the other ends of the belt.

“Mom?”

Once done, Seohyung straightens up. “It is 00:47 am. You will remain here until 6 am, your daily waking time.”

“Mom, p—please.” Jungkook struggles against his bindings but they’re too tight.

“7 am.”

Jungkook closes his mouth.

Seohyung smiles, looking down at Jungkook. "The maids will be made aware of your tardiness. You are not to leave this bathroom until I open the door and allow you out. Do you understand?"

"P—Please. M'scared. And the man—"

"A prince is never *a burden. You will learn this lesson."*

Jungkook doesn't get to say more or plead for his mother's forgiveness. She's gone moments later.

The door slams shut.

Click.

Jungkook is alone in the pitch black bathroom, not a sliver of light inside.

His eyes eventually adjust to the darkness. He can see things move in the dark, lurking in the shadows. The pulsations of his heart speed up once more. He quietly cries. He doesn't want his mother to hear him.

The sink drips, a repetitive sound that rings between his ears.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

He hears some noises.

He feels eyes on him.

Plink. Plink. Plink. Plink… Plink…

Plink. Plink. Plink.

Jungkook sits up with a gasp.

Everything is dark around him aside from some blue lights on the right.

The waterfall that slowly trickles down.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

He can still feel the silk around his wrists, the cold pipe against his spine, and the overwhelming silence in his ears.

Seohyung's voice is sharp in his mind, as though standing right next to him.

"Princes don't cry."

Jungkook swallows down the lump in his throat and the tears prickling his eyes, his lungs seeming deprived of any air.

“Princes aren’t afraid.”

He tries to abate the fear that is slowly consuming him but he fails in the darkness wrapped around him. It's a reminder. A lesson that has been taught to him dozens of times. It had worked eventually, where the fear of darkness and of seeing lost souls had disappeared.

Right now, trapped in his own mind, the lessons feel worthless.

“A prince faces his fears alone.”

And so Jungkook does.

He's not weak.

“Bastard child. Your existence is a burden enough. Do not bother me with your foolish nightmares and fears.”

Right.

That’s right.

His fears aren’t that important. He’ll be fine. He can handle it alone as he always has.

“A prince is never a burden.”

Jungkook won’t be a burden. He had promised this to himself when he had been a child. He just needs to breathe and find his air again, but it seems to be an impossible task when he feels as though he's trapped in the bathroom all over again.

He moves with difficulty, his muscles straining. He sits up on his knees and folds over himself, pressing his forehead against something soft under him.

He’s fine.

He hasn’t been thrown in the bathroom once more. *I'm not tied up,* he tells himself and rubs a hand over his other wrist. He’s away from her, the farthest he has ever been.

His skin crawls with the past presence of restraints around his wrists, whether it be Seohyung's bindings, Dohyun's cuffs, or Seungwon's shackles.

Jungkook clutches onto his own arms as he hugs himself, fingernails digging into his skin to anchor himself on the present.

A phantom, burning sensation flares at the back of his left arm.

Princes don’t cry. Princes handle any pain.

Jungkook whispers to himself, nonsensical words to his own ears, but he needs to drown the voice in his head.

Light abruptly bursts inside the area.

It helps.

It reminds him he’s not in the bathroom.

Because he’s inside a cave that Taehyung had made dark when they had gone to sleep.

Something touches Jungkook’s shoulder.

“Don’t.”

“Sorry,” a voice says. *Taehyung’s.* “I was away. Did someone get inside? I don’t see —”

Jungkook shakes his head. “Nightmare. M’fine. It’ll pass.” He slowly inhales and exhales even if it’s wavering. The stifling clamp around his throat alleviates, made better by the light of the butterflies and of the meliacitrea.

Some sounds erupt around Jungkook.

It’s some rustling, then crackling.

A hand that peeks beneath Jungkook. It pushes a storm globe that bumps against his knees.

Jungkook takes the sphere with a trembling hand. He rolls it higher up and he turns his head to the side, pressing his cheek and ear right above the storm globe. The outside is solid, yet it still feels like wind. It’s an odd sensation, but it’s grounding, akin to the thunder that he tries to sync his breathing with.

Jungkook watches how Taehyung sits on his left. He doesn’t look at Taehyung’s face. He doesn’t want to see the irritation that must be swimming in the dragonborn’s eyes because Jungkook is being annoying. A burd—

“There’s another entrance to this cave that we’ll go through when we’ll leave later today,” Taehyung starts. “It leads to the largest series of grass and flower fields in Vanae, where not a single tree can be seen for miles.”

Taehyung lays down on his back above the heap of blankets they're settled on. He's creating a second storm globe, lightning dancing across his fingers as clouds begin to form between his hands.

Jungkook can't avoid peering at Taehyung's face this time.

Taehyung looks relaxed. He does not seem to be seconds away from yelling at Jungkook.

"The fields have a bunch of different species of flowers. There's even one full of red spider lilies and a few arcanic flowers too. One of them is called lapis, its scientific name being Lapide Solis. Lapide for gemstone, solis for sun, but I'm sure you know that already," Taehyung carries on and he seems so unbothered, like Jungkook having had a nightmare is not that much of an inconvenience. "The lapis flower absorbs the sunlight and keeps it for several days, so it can be used to lighten a house as well. It's a flower that won't die or wither if you cut its stem as long as it's fed sunlight."

Taehyung continues to speak about the eclectic flora of the field.

Jungkook listens.

It takes him a while to realize that his breathing begins to even out the more he listens to Taehyung. He only notices its calmness when he sees the dozen storm globes laying on the ground, some of them rolling in the space between Jungkook and Taehyung.

Jungkook's limbs aren't as rigid anymore, so he moves to lay down on his side and face Taehyung, his head cushioned by the storm globe.

Taehyung continues to speak without any interruption, the most he ever has in Jungkook's presence.

A silence settles in the cave after the 25th storm globe is created.

Taehyung plays with one, deftly twisting it between his fingers, sometimes thinning the outer layer to wiggle his fingers inside the sphere. His head turns at some point, exchanging a gaze with Jungkook. "Feeling better?"

"Thank you," Jungkook says, his voice too rough and quiet, but Taehyung hears it. "I could've handled it on my own."

"I know. That doesn't mean you have to."

Tears collect in Jungkook's eyes against his will.

He can't stand how Taehyung so effortlessly pulls apart Seohyung's lessons, making space for Jungkook to breathe and cry and *feel,* where no shackle remains.

"I meant it when I said you can rely on me. I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm trying, so…"

"I still remember what you told me in the kitchen," Jungkook confesses, which is more of a bitter accusation.

"What?"

“When we were doing the dishes together."

“I said not to be with me only, that’s all.”

“Yeah, and I’ve been told things like that all my life. That I’m too clingy. That I'm a bother, and—Forget it.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

Jungkook chuckles but it sounds more like a hummed sob. He peers at the storm globes, distracting himself from his swelling upset by taking one globe and rubbing his thumbs over the smooth surface.

“All I meant was to not let it be just me.”

“I think it’s easier if I don’t rely on anyone to begin with.”

“Bottling things up isn’t good. It’ll end up exploding in your face.”

“That’s rich coming from you."

“You’re worse than me on that aspect."

Jungkook scoffs.

“I may be emotionally stunted, but you’re emotionally withdrawn.”

Jungkook glances at Taehyung. “What does that even mean?”

“You understand your own feelings, but you reject them.”

Jungkook’s retort lies mute on his tongue. “And what if I do? That’s none of your concern."

“You shouldn’t.”

“I’ve always been told that I should.”

“But you’re not with Seohyung or Sungmin anymore. You’re free to do what you want.”

“I don’t know about freedom,” Jungkook derisively says. “Sure, it’s been better since I moved to Vanae, but at the end of the day, I’m still Amaris’ prince, the Queen and King’s son. I’ll have to see them again. I'll have to work alongside them for decades. I can’t escape her. I’ll never really be free.”

“Kill them.”

Jungkook blinks at Taehyung.

Then he bursts into laughter at the fierce seriousness in Taehyung’s tone.

“Are you *insane*?”

“All I’m saying is that it’s feasible.”

“Right. Let me murder my own father and Seohyung, because that will end well."

“It wouldn’t be the first time betrayal happens within human dynasties. Although it wouldn’t be betrayal in your case.”

“I can’t just kill them.”

“The option is there.”

Jungkook giggles, because that’s the normal, sensible thing to do when he thinks about killing Seohyung and Sungmin. “That’d be difficult to achieve on my own without being caught or accused.”

“Everyone would help you, starting with my family. My mother would happily do so. She hates Seohyung.”

“Would you too?”

“Yes."

Jungkook chuckles.

“I mean it,” Taehyung somberly continues. “I believe some people aren’t worthy of being alive. Like the man with the scent. Or Seohyung.”

“You’d actually help me?” Jungkook wonders, the conversation so surreal yet soothing.

“With a smile on my fucking face. Vile pigs. This dynasty should have died a while ago. Half offense,” Taehyung adds with a glance at Jungkook.

“I’ll help you kill Dohyun." It’s only a matter of time now. “Do you want him to die?”

“Yes. I need him to."

“Will you be able to do it yourself?” Jungkook asks, and Taehyung’s composure falters.

Taehyung is silent for a moment, playing with a storm globe again, but his gaze is distant. “I’d like to think I would, but I don’t really know,” he admits. “I thought I would have done it back at the manor, and I was thinking about it, but I had to let go.”

“How so?”

“The second after you passed out, Seungwon charged toward you. It was either killing the man with the scent or saving you.”

Jungkook's breath halts for a moment.

Dohyun is still alive.

Jungkook has been put first for once.

“Thank you...” Jungkook whispers.

“I’m not saying this to be thanked.”

“I know.” Jungkook wants to shuffle a little closer to Taehyung but the crawling is still creeping up his skin, so he remains where he is, content with Taehyung being in his vicinity. “If it gets to that point, I’ll kill Dohyun for you.”

“What about Seohyung and Sungmin? Do you want them to die?”

“Not my father, no. I don’t really care about him.”

“And Seohyung?”

“I hate her."

“How much?”

“Enough to hopefully free myself from her one day.”

Taehyung hums. “Breaking necks is very easy for me.”

Jungkook's body shakes from his rising hilarity at Taehyung’s words. “This could have been our wedding vows: killing for each other.”

“Morbid but fitting.”

“I, Jeon Jungkook, vow to kill Dohyun for you.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Taehyung says but Jungkook does not miss the amusement in Taehyung’s voice.

Jungkook pokes Taehyung's shoulder. “Say it too.”

Taehyung heaves a deep sigh. “I vow to kill Seohyung for you.”

Jungkook lets go of the storm globe to fold his hands under his head. A smile stretches his lips and it grows when Taehyung’s gaze lands on him. “That’s a bit messed up, isn’t it?”

“Who cares."

“Never once in a million years would I have thought I’d bond with my husband over us killing for each other.”

“I’m one of a kind."

Jungkook hides his grin behind a hand when he catches the light curve on Taehyung’s lips that would be unnoticeable if Jungkook’s attention hadn't been so narrowed down on the dragonborn.

“Feeling better?” Taehyung inquires for the second time.

It’s pleasing, to have someone be insistent with Jungkook. “Mhm, I am. How are your scars?”

“Why do you always do that?” Taehyung asks and there isn’t any annoyance in it per se, but he sounds lost.

“Do what?”

“Divert the conversation away from you. Is this about the whole… burden thing?”

“Among other things,” Jungkook chooses to say and clams back in his shell.

“Like?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Do you really not want to?”

“Storm.”

“Alright.” Taehyung sits up.

Jungkook wonders if he has pushed the dragonborn away too much. He’s about to apologize and explain another time that his past is a touchy subject, that talking about it makes him feel too vulnerable, however Taehyung precedes him.

“Carving is to me what is what to you?”

“What is… What?” Jungkook rises on his elbows.

Taehyung rummages through a pouch and he retrieves his carving tools, making his way toward the boulder. “What’s something you like to do? Like carving for me.”

Jungkook straightens up. “I like sketching and painting.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t bring any paints with you when you moved here. Aside from your botany book.” Taehyung plops down in front of the boulder. He leaves his carving tool and two pieces of wood on the flat surface of the rock.

“Because I was never allowed to paint, but I would with dirt, mud, or when I’d visit Amaris’ schools." Those times were so much fun, surrounded by excited children eager to show Jungkook this or that painting. “I’d paint with the students there.”

“Vanae’s market sells a lot of paint."

“Do they sell powder? I think I’d like to try making my own paints."

“Yeah, they do. There’s a seller we can visit.”

Jungkook fiddles with the storm globe on his lap. Then he tentatively asks “Can we go there to buy some one day?”

“We can, it’s no bother,” Taehyung answers, unknowingly shushing the voice nagging at the back of Jungkook’s head.

“Thank you.”

Taehyung nods in front of him, a silent request that Jungkook complies to as he stands. He brings all of the storm globes with him that he arranges in a circle in front of the boulder, and he places a pillow at the center where he sits crossed legs, he and Taehyung settled across one another.

When Taehyung slides one of the two pieces of wood in front of Jungkook, Jungkook tilts his head to the side.

“Do you want to try carving?”

Jungkook’s brows fly up his forehead.

The rush of happiness that swells within him is the same kind that had flickered when Taehyung had made a demonstration with the meliacitrea’s branch. It’s itchy, swirling and twisting. “I’d love that… I’ve been curious about it.”

Taehyung snorts. “Yeah. I noticed.”

Jungkook’s smile softens as he surveys Taehyung who organizes the tools in a neat row on the boulder. “When you have… nightmares, do you carve?”

“It depends. I usually carve or fly."

The ease in which Taehyung admits this is uncanny to Jungkook, eons away from the self-restraint Jungkook usually musters.

“What do you do when you have nightmares?”

“Nothing.” Jungkook averts his gaze to run a finger along the sharp angle of the piece of wood. “I kinda—” He sighs. He *knows* why it’s so difficult to speak about anything related to his childhood, but it still takes him aback how everything shuts down in his mind, where only a defensive apathy is left. “I wasn’t allowed to. I had to deal with them on my own. So.”

“And how would you deal with them on your own?”

Jungkook does not respond.

“You know what to say if you want me to shut up.”

Jungkook knows. “I’d close my eyes. I’d imagine myself somewhere else, in a place where I’d be free. There wasn’t much else I could do.”

“What about Revna?”

“Seohyung would take the necklace away.”

“What a fucking bitch.”

Jungkook barks out a laugh so unbecoming of Amaris’ prince. “She is.”

“The offer to break her neck still stands. Elders know the sound it’ll make will be like music to my ears.”

Jungkook snickers, relieved that Taehyung isn't making a big deal of all that Jungkook is confiding him with. "I'm keeping it in mind, don't worry."

"Want to carve?"

Jungkook welcomes the change of subject with open arms.

He nods, excitement bubbling in him. It's dampened by Seohyung's voice that is a bit too loud. Maybe Taehyung doesn't necessarily want to share his passion for carving with Jungkook. Maybe Taehyung's just being nice.

"I know it'll sound childish, but I rarely do things that I don't want to."

Jungkook clings onto those words and the simplicity Taehyung brings in the clustered yarn that makes Jungkook's life.

"What?"

Jungkook jolts, torn out of his head. "Uh?"

"I can hear your mind churning from over here."

"Can you— Never mind."

"You can tell me."

"No. It's—"

"You can tell me," Taehyung reiterates, albeit a lot more firmly.

"Can you do, like, a big storm globe?"

Maybe it'll shut her voice.

Taehyung stands to gather every globe, sending wafts of his stormy scent toward Jungkook when he crouches next to him. He blends the spheres together, creating a large globe above Jungkook's head.

Then he forms a ring in front of his mouth and he must be blowing some wind because the sphere of thunder caves in and spreads above where Jungkook and Taehyung are. The dome of lightning and cloud curves in the shape of an umbrella in a spellbinding paradox. Rain falls, but the umbrella keeps the area above and around the boulder dry, the drops rolling down the dome to fall on the grass.

It sounds like rain pattering against a window, and it's not too loud at first. Not loud enough.

Jungkook does not need to ask: Taehyung heightens the storm umbrella, the thunder and pitter-patter of the rain louder echoing through the cave.

It's so lovely to be understood so well.

A butterfly flutters toward Taehyung, the wings brushing against his nose.

“Why do they keep coming to you?” Jungkook asks through a laugh.

“Fuck if I know. Animals like me for some reason.”

“You’re like that princess who sings to animals in a tale."

“I’m not a damn princess.”

“A princess would definitely not swear, Kim Taehyung. How dare you.”

Taehyung zaps Jungkook. “Shut up and carve.”

“I don’t know where to start,” Jungkook complains through pursed lips.

It’s a mundane thing, really.

Most would have directly handed Jungkook the tool. It’d be the most natural thing to do. Except that Taehyung grabs then deposits the gouge in front of Jungkook.

Taehyung’s carefulness wanes the uncomfortable crawling in Jungkook.

“What do you want to carve?”

“A snake’s head,” Jungkook says. Taehyung levels him with an unimpressed look. “What…”

Taehyung shakes his head. “Follow what I do. I’ll go slow. First take the carving knife to sketch the snake’s head on the sides of the wood, so that you have a template to guide you. Always keep in mind that once you chip a piece of the wood, you can’t put it back.”

“Okay.” Jungkook takes the knife, the blade short but pointy. He begins to draw on the wood, visualizing Revna’s cute head and round eyes in his head. Taehyung is also starting a brand new sculpture and Jungkook observes his movements, readjusting his hold on the knife and mirroring Taehyung’s motions. The dragonborn’s fingers are unexpectedly dainty in appearance, a contrast to how callused the palms are. “Do you want to play a game?” Jungkook proposes, cozy with the cocoon the umbrella of storm forms above him.

Taehyung's gaze narrows. “Depends. What game?”

“Twenty questions,” Jungkook excitedly answers.

Taehyung loudly scoffs.

“It’s a good game to get to know each other better! So. Yes or no?”

“Sure...”

“I’ll start then.”

“Fuck off. Let’s decide who starts.”

“I’m the one who proposed the game, so I get to start."

“No. Coin flip.”

Jungkook rolls his eyes. “No. I start.”

“Alright.” Taehyung focuses back on his carving. “I’m not playing then.”

“You’re such a child!”

“And you’re a fucking brat.”

“I proposed. I start.”

Taehyung is the one rolling his eyes this time and the motion looks so violent that Jungkook worries Taehyung’s eyes may be stuck at the back of his head. “Whatever.”

“So," Jungkook starts with a pleased smile, "first question: what’s a knot?”

Taehyung's carving knife bores into the piece of wood. One of his eyes twitches. “I’m not playing anymore.”

“Don’t be so boring.”

“Being boring has its advantages, like not having this conversation.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Come on.”

“I said no.”

“I want to know.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll ask Jimin if you don’t tell me. I’ll know eventually.”

Taehyung stares at Jungkook, his chest heaving around a sigh that he exhales through his nose. “It’s a muscle that swells,” he ultimately says and breaks the piece of wood in half, tossing away the part that he had accidentally pierced. “At the base.”

“At the base of what?”

“What do you think, Viper?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you."

“A knot is related to sex, so you can figure out where the swelling is.”

“But it can be anything though? It can be the arm.”

“It’s not the arm, you…” Taehyung pinches the bridge of his nose, a pink tint coloring the tip of his ears.

“Then what? A finger?”

“No, for Elder’s sake.”

Jungkook hums. “The *wrist?”*

“Not the wrist.”

“But Jimin said a fist *can* be inside someone.”

“Because he’s psychotic and deranged. Fuck. I don’t want to think about Jimin and *this.* ”

“But—”

“No. Shut up.”

“But I want to know where the swelling is! It’s not on a foot, right? I’m not sure how how feet can be included in sex, but—”

“By the Elders..."

“Just tell me w—”

“It’s a swelling at the base of the dick, you damn Viper.”

“Oh!” Jungkook says, surprised. “Oh,” he repeats, this time with a heat in his cheeks. “ *Oh?”* He says as he reaches the third stage of his confusion. He glances down at his own crotch, imagining what it would look like. “A swelling? Around the whole base?” He asks and Taehyung makes a curt nod. “Does it hurt?”

“For fuck’s sake.” Taehyung leaves his tools on the boulder to prop his elbows on it, fingers framing his brows and closed eyes. “I can’t believe we’re having this discussion.”

“I’m curious. Does it?”

“I don’t know."

“What do you mean?”

“Initially a knot’s intent is to breed and lock… everything inside for some time. I’ve never had sex so I don’t know how it feels.”

“But, like.” Jungkook squirms on the pillow he’s sitting on, readjusting his position to fold his legs under him. “Can’t, uh, a knot happen outside of, you know. Like. When you’re on your own?”

“It can. As I said the primary intent is to breed whoever is receiving the knot, but that obviously doesn’t mean it only happens with this goal in mind. It can occur whenever and with anyone equipped with a dick. It just never happened to me.”

“Never?”

Taehyung emits a noncommittal sound.

Jungkook doesn’t partake much in solitary pleasures, and he has never even thought about venturing any lower than the usual thing, but now his curiosity is ignited.

Would receiving a knot hurt? How much does it swell?

Is Taehyung interested in this too?

“Are you curious about how it feels?”

“No. I don’t care."

“Is it really bigger than a fist?”

Taehyung pins Jungkook with a pointed look. “You’re way too fucking curious about that.”

“Well. I *am* gay. So…”

Taehyung grunts and Jungkook snickers. “It depends on the dick, I guess.”

“Makes sense,” Jungkook nods. He leaves the carving knife on the boulder to grab the gouge and begin nipping at the wood. “So, like, the penis—”

“You did not just use the word ‘penis’. What are you? Ninety years old?”

“What else am I supposed to say?” Jungkook exclaims, offended by *Taehyung’s* offense.

“Dick?! Cock?! Not ‘penis’, fucking hell.”

“I don’t think ‘fucking hell’ would be judicious. It sounds painful for the penis,” Jungkook jests and snickers to himself.

“Never mind. You’re 12. And stop saying ‘penis.’”

“Shut up. I’m not vulgar like you.”

“That’s right. You’re a brat, which is worse."

“No, it’s not,” Jungkook says with a laugh. “But, as I was saying, the peni—”

“Just say dick. It won’t burn your tongue.”

“No. I prefer using penis.”

“Dick is better.”

“Penis is.”

“No, dick.”

“Penis.”

“Dick.”

“Penis.”

“Dick.”

Jungkook lowers his heating face to press it against the cold surface of the boulder. “I can’t believe we’re arguing about that.”

“I can. ‘Cause you’re a stubborn brat.”

“Shifting blame is foul, prick.” Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip to bite back his grin. “So the *dick*,” he says with an emphasis that Taehyung claps at with a sardonic smile, “it stays inside and then the knot swells? And it locks everything in?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“It depends. For some it’s a few minutes, for others it can be half an hour or more.”

“That’s a long time,” Jungkook muses.

“Did I tie the knot of your curiosity so we can move on from this?”

Jungkook dissolves into a series of laughter and giggles at the pun, tears springing in his eyes. “That was— That was such a bad joke."

“Yet you're laughing. Because I *am* hilarious."

“Yes, you are,” Jungkook sniffles and wipes his eyes. “It’s your turn.”

“For how long have you known Namjoon and the warlock?”

Jungkook clears his throat, picking up the gouge and resuming his work. “I’ve known Joon since forever. We grew up together. He was given to Seohyung and Sungmin by his parents to become my page.”

“So he always lived at the citadel with you?”

“Mhm.” Jungkook is pleased that Taehyung is inquiring more about those that he considers to be his family. “He and Yoongi are the only reason why I’m still somewhat sane. As for Yoongi, he was found when I was 12? I think? Around that age. And after that, he worked for Seohyung and Sungmin.”

“Found?”

“Yes.” Jungkook does not say more.

“What about the other warlock Seohyung and Sungmin detain?” Taehyung asks, a seriousness washing over him.

“I never met or saw them, but Revna had spied on some conversations and that’s how I got to know that this warlock is…” Jungkook trails off with a hum. “Self-centered. They want what’s good for them and their loyalty lies with themselves.”

“Could it be your mother?”

Jungkook glances at Taehyung whose quick thinking never fails to surprise Jungkook. “I had questioned the same thing back then, but… I don’t think it’s my biological mother. I don’t see why they would keep her around yet away from me.”

“Probably for selfish reasons. It seems to be a running theme with those vile pigs. We’ll have to figure out who this warlock is, they may be helping Seohyung with the primordial stone.”

“Yes, we will," Jungkook smiles. "My turn. Have you ever been in a relationship before? Even for a day or something like that?”

Taehyung looks away from the fox he’s chiseling to quirk a brow at Jungkook. “That’s a random question.”

“I’m—”

“Curious,” Taehyung finishes. “Yes, yes. I know. And no, never.”

“ *Really* never?”

“Why is that so surprising?” Taehyung scowls.

“Because you’re funny and caring. In your own way. And mostly toward dragonborns. Plus you’re handsome.”

“Most dragonborns see romantic relationships as something to be cherished,” Taehyung starts, and Jungkook attentively listens as he pauses in his carving, eager to learn more. “We’re old fashioned in the sense that a lot of us believe in finding the one and mating for life. Break ups are rare, divorces even more, although it has changed a bit with the newer generation.”

“Do you think the same?”

“I don’t care about any of that and never have.”

“Is this part of why you’ve never had a boyfriend?”

Taehyung shrugs. “More or less. Some people made advances to me but I wasn’t interested. It always felt like too much effort for nothing, and I never liked anyone as more than a friend.”

“Not even a crush?”

“No. I’m more focused on my future as a leader rather than as a mate. My turn: have *you* ever been in a relationship?”

“Returning my questions is both foul and boring.”

“You proposed the game,” Taehyung says with a cant of his head. “Now play it.”

“Prick... And no. I’ve never had a boyfriend or anything like that. I once had a crush on a prince? Kind of? Although I think it was the curiosity of being near a boy my age. The worst is that he ended up being an absolute prick so the ‘crush’ lasted for perhaps an afternoon.”

“Have you ever wanted a mate?”

“A mate?”

“A lover. Although mate for us means more. It’s a lifetime bond and love.”

“I never got the chance to entertain that thought, to be honest,” Jungkook muses. “All I’ve known is that I would be married to someone I don’t know. I never imagined myself to fall in love with my husband.” He also doesn’t believe anyone can grant him the love he wants, but he makes no mention of it. “I never cared about that either.”

Taehyung hums a chuckle. “Lying to me?”

“No?”

“I’m pretty sure you do care about this, but you force yourself not to. It’s your turn.”

Jungkook stares at Taehyung, at a loss for words. He does for long enough for Taehyung to glance at him.

“What?”

“I… You’re really fascinating,” Jungkook blurts out and ignores the *‘I know’* Taehyung responds with. “Rare are those who see past the veneer of Amaris’ Prince.”

“It’s not that difficult.”

“Is it though."

Taehyung must catch onto the sincerity in Jungkook’s timber because he halts in his carving to stare back at him.

“I’m good at hiding my emotions, what I think and how I feel. I’m *really* good at hiding who I am, but you see through that mask. Not only that, you tear it off.”

“Tearing is a strong word."

“Maybe, but it’s true. I've been more myself since I was pushed against a wall then threatened to be however I want to be.”

“I didn’t threaten you. I hate pretenses. Yours was fucking obnoxious.”

“Do you like me better without it?”

“Let’s not get hasty.”

Jungkook chuckles. He's been laughing so much lately. “Can you show me how to angle it?” He asks Taehyung, lost on how to use the gouge. He keeps chipping too much.

“You’ll have to drop it.”

“Hm?”

“You told me to not touch you, so you’ll have to drop the gouge.”

Jungkook wonders if he's looking 'all soft' at Taehyung.

He probably is.

“You can," Jungkook says. "I’m alright now.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.” *Please*.

Taehyung takes a hold of Jungkook’s hands, his fingers warm. “There’s no need to use as much force as you’ve been doing,” he says and lightly tips the gouge Jungkook is holding.

Taehyung continues to explain, Jungkook concentrated on the words and motions Taehyung shows him. However he’s also distracted by how gentle Taehyung is, where his hands grasp Jungkook’s like they’ve never been held before. Jungkook won’t call the way Taehyung guides Jungkook’s fingers as tender, but it *is* gentle, a dichotomy to Seohyung’s biting nails, tight grips and hard pulls.

"Now try it," Taehyung says once done explaining and lets go of Jungkook.

Jungkook’s skin is warm and tingly where Taehyung’s had been touching it.

He

Jungkook begins to chisel the front of the rectangular piece of wood to create the curve of the serpent’s head. “Like this?” He asks after a few minutes.

“Yeah.”

“Is it alright so far?”

“It is. You’re doing good,” Taehyung says distractedly.

Jungkook preens.

Jungkook watches how dexterous Taehyung’s hands are, each movement calculated, and there’s something marvelous about someone being skilled at what they do, even for hobbies or work, like Jimin when he sculpts metal.

“My turn,” Jungkook says, reminded of their game. “Favorite scent?”

“Vanilla.”

The gouge Jungkook uses sinks a tad too deep in the soft wood. His head darts up to glower at Taehyung. “Are you kidding me?”

“No?”

“Then *why* did you react like that with the perfume I bought? It’s vanilla scented! And it wasn’t even that strong! I don’t like pungent perfumes.”

“That one smelt horrible.”

“Or maybe Jimin is right and you like my scent." It’s a teasing quip, but a noise of curiosity crawls up Jungkook’s throat at Taehyung’s lack of response. “Do you?”

“Did I say that?”

“You’re not denying.”

“Your scent was a weird blend with the vanilla.”

“What do I smell like usually?”

“I don't know how to explain, but it's bleak. You don’t smell like death per se, but there’s a grim aspect to it. So I guess you do smell like death."

Jungkook grows self-conscious. “I see.”

“And you smell like flowers too.”

“Flowers?”

Taehyung hums, clearly concentrated on the fur of the fox’s bushy tail, so much so that he does not seem to realize how freely he’s speaking.

“I don’t understand why the perfume bothered you so much, then. If anything, the vanilla must have tamed down the grimness in my scent.”

“I don’t mind the grimness. It’s your scent and it’s familiar. The vanilla was jarring. Scents are important for dragonborns."

It reminds Jungkook of how dragonborns can sometimes ‘scent’ each other — although Jungkook does not really comprehend how that concept works.

“They’re a way for us to understand people and recognize them," Taehyung says, "so perfumes can bother this.”

“Understand people?”

“When you’re upset you smell bitter, when you’re scared you smell sour.”

“You truly are a bloodhound.”

“Fuck off,” Taehyung glares.

“What do I smell like right now?”

Taehyung’s gaze soothes as his nose twitches. “Grim. Floral. A hint of caramel.”

“Caramel?” Jungkook hasn’t eaten anything with any caramel. “It might be because I’m really happy right now.”

Taehyung huffs.

They continue their game, soon reaching 20 questions and asking more.

Jungkook had hoped they would learn more about each other through this game, and it exceeds his expectations.

Taehyung tells him about the time where he had been lost in those caves for days when he had been younger, while Jungkook tells Taehyung how he had once been stuck inside a chimney while trying to run away in the forest. Jungkook does not ask about Taehyung's favorite color, meal, animal or any mundane information like this. He already knows. Taehyung avoids questions like these as well, having most likely acquired a similar knowledge if the way he always adds honey in Jungkook's tea is any hint.

Jungkook also learns that Taehyung had been unable to control which breath he could use until he was 11 or 12 years old, and so Jungkook says "How does this roulette work? Is it something actually real?"

"Not at all. It's something I started to imagine to help me select which breath I want my arcane to settle on. I visualize a circle in my head that I cut into seven triangles, then I add an arrow to it that I turn and slot on a triangle. I add a second arrow if I want to use a second breath, and so on. I've trained for years, so I've grown a lot better at choosing the breath I want to use without needing to visualize the roulette in my head, but I still do sometimes."

Then, Jungkook shares about how he hadn't been able to help souls pass at first, the flames not strong enough to aid them. Taehyung tells a story next about how when he had first manifested his arcane, it had been through his fire breath and him burning his bedroom and half of the house to ashes. Jungkook laughs again because he's imagining a young, toddler Taehyung, waddling around with a pout on his face while accidentally sneezing out fire.

Jungkook doesn't share much about his childhood when Taehyung reciprocates the questions, and so Taehyung stops with this theme. Jungkook smiles.

"I know we're technically married, but we're single," Taehyung says and Jungkook rolls his eyes with a sigh. "Do you think you'd want to be in a, like, romantic or whatever relationship in the future? Tell me the truth this time."

"Do you mean with you?"

"No, not with me," Taehyung grimaces. Jungkook smacks his arm. "With someone else."

"It doesn't matter."

"Why?"

"Because even if I want it, it won't happen."

"What?"

Jungkook's lips pinch into a thin line. "No one will be able to give me what I want."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

“Because I’m greedy."

“And?”

“ *And,* ” Jungkook says with a certain attitude, “even if someone is willing to temporarily satiate my greed, it won’t last forever. Everyone would grow tired if I let my greed run free. It’s ravenous, Taehyung.”

“But what if you meet someone who’s greedy too?”

“Uh?” Jungkook stupidly says and peers at Taehyung who’s blowing the flakes of wood away from his shaping fox.

“There might be someone greedy to give you the thing you’re greedy about.”

“That… That’s not how it works.”

“Why not?”

“Because— I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Taehyung lifts the wooden fox to his face to examine the tail, then his gaze locks with Jungkook. “Let’s say you’re greedy to eat 20 loaves of bread, maybe there’s a person out there who’s greedy to bake those 20 loaves but believes that no one will ever be greedy enough to want to eat this much bread.”

“Oh,” Jungkook breathes out.

Oh.

It had never crossed Jungkook’s mind, who always viewed his greed as impossible to fulfil.

So now something new unravels within him.

Hope.

Cruel and maddening.

It’s worse than yearning for something and knowing it’ll never happen because with hope, a new feeling arrives: the wait. The wait — *hope* — is to misery what a snake is to nature: it slithers inside, subdued and discreet, until it lunges at someone’s neck, filling their mouth with the metallic taste of their impatience.

Jungkook doesn’t know if he wants the presence of this serpent, but it has awakened now, the creature prowling and waiting.

Growing.

Jungkook’s hands ball up into fists around the piece of wood and tool. “Do you…” He shouldn’t seek reassurance, but he does anyway. “Waiting for someone to bake those 20 loaves is— It’s frustrating. Hope is frustrating.”

“But hope is better than despair or surrender, I think. It gives you something to strive for. It keeps you alive.”

Jungkook quietly peers at Taehyung who swears when the ear he’s trying to chisel does not go as well as he wants to. “Maybe.”

“Certainly."

Jungkook goes back to carving, his mind churning over what Taehyung has said.

The rain that had abated while they had been discussing together grows louder at a flick of Taehyung’s hand. Jungkook relaxes, his thoughts quietening, the scent of petrichor suffusing his senses.

A couple hours elapse like this.

Jungkook has advanced well with his figurine of a snake’s head. He doesn’t have the patience Taehyung shows for carving, but he believes that for a first attempt, the finished product isn’t too bad.

Jungkook studies the serpent’s head, twisting it in different angles. He finesses the engraving of the sigil on the forehead, adding a few more tiny scales around it. When he deems it as completed, he deposits the gouge on the boulder and leans forward on his elbows. "Taehyung, look." He lifts the wooden sculpture up against his nose.

Taehyung peers at Jungkook then takes Jungkook's sculpture. He examines it with a critical eye, humming and frowning to himself for a couple minutes.

“Just say it looks nice,” Jungkook mumbles.

“It’s not bad for a first attempt.”

Jungkook snatches his *pretty* rendition of Revna. “Complimenting someone won’t kill you."

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that.”

Jungkook gives Taehyung a snide look.

Taehyung grabs the snake’s head again but Jungkook doesn’t let go, and so their fingers brush as Taehyung shuffles forward.

Jungkook should release his grip. The fact that he and Taehyung both hold the sculpture is *awkward*, however there’s a skin on skin contact, and Jungkook gorges onto it.

“It looks nice," Taehyung says after finishing his inspection.

Jungkook perks up. “It does?”

Taehyung nods. “You already acquired the basic skills on how to carve. You said you like painting, so I’m not surprised you got the dimension and proportions well. It can be the hardest part. You’re lacking patience though, and it shows."

“I tried my best," Jungkook pouts. “It’s a nice first attempt though, right?”

“Yeah.” Taehyung places the snake’s wooden head on the rock. “You did good.”

So.

Jungkook preens again.

Half because he relishes in praises in general, and half because it comes from Taehyung, the gruff dragonborn.

“Thank you,” Jungkook says, the smile audible in his voice, a flush warming his cheeks. “What time is it?”

“It must be noon soon.”

“We still have the whole day before going back.”

“We should leave when it’s still light outside if you want to see the field. It’s pretty at night too with the glowing lapis, but during the day it is even more.”

“I’d love that.” Jungkook takes the fox Taehyung has sculpted, admiring the intricate details Taehyung has managed to carve in a few hours. “When do we leave, if so?”

“Four will be good.”

“Okay." It’s good to not have to think about these kinds of things, a rare occurrence Jungkook. “Do you want to jump again?”

“Fuck yeah.” Taehyung stands, sliding off his shirt in one smooth movement.

Jungkook springs up as well, removing his top as he runs after Taehyung toward the waterfall.

Taehyung says naught when Jungkook wordlessly holds his hand before they both dive.

Jungkook and Taehyung have spent the past hours diving then harvesting some melias to store them in the now empty basket of food.

And talking.

They’ve been talking *a lot*, which is as surprising as it is pleasing.

They have packed all of their belongings, Jungkook carrying one of the bags while Taehyung handles the other. Jungkook doesn’t want to leave yet, having enjoyed this suspension away from the outside world.

He yearns to stay for a little longer, and he says so to Taehyung.

"We can come back here whenever you want, Viper. And once you're more familiar with it, you can visit the cave on your own."

"I don't think I'll come here by myself."

"Why not?"

Jungkook shrugs.

He does not mention that no matter how spellbinding the cave may have been, Taehyung's presence is what has made it so enchanting.

When they come out of the cave, Jungkook is first blinded by the bright sunlight, then by an endless sea of grass so vast that it stretches over the horizon.

"Oh my God…"

"Right? It's fucking beautiful."

Jungkook tries not to think about the fact that Taehyung has used the exact same adjective to compliment him.

He miserably fails.

They begin to walk through the grass that is so high it reaches Jungkook's knees.

There are several different broad patches. The first one is grass only. The second they enter has Snowdrops and bushes of Baby's-breath, the white mingling with the green. The smells are heavenly as well, carried by the cool wind that rustles Jungkook's clothes, whispering through the grass' strands and flowers' petals. Jungkook wants to stay here and paint the sight, then tuck the flowers in his botany book to study them.

Jungkook and Taehyung leisurely strolls amidst the field, neither of them hurried to get back home.

Jungkook spreads his arms to let the tip of fingers run through the fresh strands of grass while Taehyung walks by his side, looking so at peace, hands in his pants' pockets and hair pushed back by the wind.

"We can come back here if you want," Taehyung offers.

"Hm?"

"For your botany book. I didn't think of going through this exit until this morning, so it didn't cross my mind to tell you to get it."

Jungkook can't remember the last time someone has shown such attention for him, aside from Yoongi and Namjoon. No one would care about his love for the flora. Seohyung certainly never has, the woman preferring to either burn or throw out Jungkook's sketching books whenever she would tear them from their hidden spot.

Jungkook's happiness is nurtured for once, rather than expunged.

“I’d really love that,” Jungkook whispers, a gentle tide of emotion rising in him. “It wouldn’t be a bother?”

“No. I love this place. I love the forest and spend my days there, but this field is… There’s something freeing about it." Taehyung's lids fall shut. “It’s only the sky, flowers and birds all becoming one canvas. It’s even prettier in summer. I come to stay there for days when I feel like it.”

“I’d love to join some times.”

Taehyung huffs. “Sure.”

Jungkook walks near Taehyung but he pauses when Taehyung halts. Taehyung drops his bags on the ground.

Jungkook confusedly peers at Taehyung. “What is it?”

A blast of wind is the only answer Jungkook receives, strong enough to shrug the winter coat off his shoulders.

A gargantuan dragon stands in Taehyung’s place. Taehyung shuffles on his talons, stepping away from Jungkook who can now admire the dragon’s entire beauty.

Jungkook has to crane his neck backward to observe him, and he can’t quell down the unadulterated awe that must eclipse the surprise on his face.

Taehyung’s dragon form is so *breathtaking*.

The scales, shimmering and seeming alive, catch the sunlight that bathes the area. They shift in their colors when Taehyung moves, their iridescent hues a mirror of the field’s plethora of flowers.

One gnarled finger rivaling Jungkook's height inches closer to him, then, with a slow motion, the claw carefully slips beneath the handle of Jungkook's bag to grab and carry it. The jaw parts open around a huff, displaying the rows of sharp teeth and fangs, and he shakes himself once, the spikes running down his neck, spine and tail quivering.

Taehyung could eat a human in one bite, Jungkook marvels, and the thought is oddly charming in its power. However this isn’t what snatches Jungkook’s rapt attention the most.

It’s the wings that spread as Taehyung shakes them.

They’re so unbelievably beautiful, casting a yards long shadow across the field and Jungkook.

Jungkook can’t look away.

Two pools of molten gold that drift on Jungkook, the pupils thin, vertical slits. Soil is dislodged when the acute claws dig into it as he shifts on his talons to seemingly work out the kinks in his body, his tail swishing from side to side in a whistling sound.

Taehyung stills, staring at Jungkook.

They’ve never really interacted while Taehyung had been in his dragon form.

Jungkook is a little — *a lot* — nervous to be in front of such a majestic, regal dragon who could very well squash him to death if the mood strikes him. Not that he's worried that Taehyung will, but the dragon *is* both impressive and intimidating.

Taehyung's head lowers. It stops right before Jungkook.

The snout, teeth and endless expense of white skin is all that Jungkook can see.

A buzz rises within him, elated.

He may have underestimated how immense Taehyung is when he had thought the dragon could swallow him in one bite. Taehyung wouldn't even need to bite if he wanted to eat a human. Jungkook thinks back on when Hoseok had mentioned being concerned about Taehyung using his bones as toothpicks. In reality, Jungkook doesn't believe a human's biggest bone would be big enough to be used as a toothpick for the dragon. It'd probably break trying to squeeze between two teeth.

"You're really pretty," Jungkook murmurs but Taehyung still hears it.

A rumble echoes, deep and resounding through the air. It ends in a scoff that blows a puff of air on Jungkook's face and pushes his hair back. He laughs and raises a hand, curious to see what the skin feels like, but his other hand flies up to tuck them both against his chest.

"Can I… Can I touch you?"

Taehyung's head tilts. The motion is slow, however the dragon is so gigantic that it sends a gust of air that ruffles the flowers' petals. He emits a sound, some sort of brief, soft growl.

Jungkook doesn't understand what it means, but Taehyung does not budge, head still lowered on the ground, and so Jungkook takes that as a permission.

Jungkook is timid when his right hand approaches Taehyung's head. His palm sprawls over the snout that is warm under his skin, and he can feel the equally warm air wash over his form whenever Taehyung exhales through his nose. When Taehyung doesn't appear to be bothered by the touch, Jungkook places his other hand on the snout, sliding both of them from side to side to feel the smooth skin beneath his fingertips.

A flare of mischief bubbles in Jungkook.

He leans close to Taehyung's head and lightly presses his forehead against it.

A loud kiss resounds in the silence when he smacks a peck on the snout, punctuating it with a *'Muah!'*.

Taehyung, in his usual dramatics, jerks away as though burnt by fire. He even manages to scowl and glare at Jungkook who bursts into laughter. Taehyung growls, menacing, but it only serves to heighten Jungkook's amusement.

An odd rumble erupts in the field, coming from Taehyung. His mouth parts open. He blows at Jungkook.

Jungkook falls back on his rear from the force of it. Before he can complain about anything, a cloud of lightning is sent his way, the tingles running through his entire body. "That hurts!"

Taehyung somehow manages to pin Jungkook with an unimpressed look.

“It *does* tickle though...” Jungkook flops on his back in the middle of the field, Taehyung hovering above him. “Can I touch your teeth?” He asks when he notices how some of them are protruding on the sides.

Taehyung’s head crosses the distance.

Jungkook drags his fingers along one of the fangs, passing by the acute point. “You could kill me so easily,” Jungkook blurts out, surprising himself. But there's just *something* about the sheer raw strength Taehyung has.

Taehyung closes his jaw around Jungkook’s extended arm, gently gnawing on it.

“*‘Don’t tempt me’*,” Jungkook says in his impeccable imitation of the dragonborn. He snickers when Taehyung sends a tiny ball of lightning on his forehead.

Taehyung straightens up. He grabs his own bags that he keeps in a talon along with Jungkook's. The grass and stems of the flower plaster flat from the force of the wind Taehyung’s wings create as he lifts himself off the ground.

Taehyung draws some circles in the sky, ascending then diving back down a moment later, and Jungkook has to protect his eyes every now and then when the sunlight hits Taehyung’s form in a blinding angle.

Jungkook rises to his feet and picks up his winter coat.

One begins to walk while the other flies, Jungkook and Taehyung both resuming their path home.

Taehyung lowers next to Jungkook and glides forward, his flight measured. Jungkook is captivated by Taehyung, unable to look away from him for very long.

Taehyung floats above Jungkook at some point who’s walking through a field of only grass, and Taehyung swings his wings with more power, the grass undulating in waves in the area.

Jungkook grins. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes for a moment when he catches the scent of jasmines farther away. He opens his eyes to survey the dragonborn. His thoughts trace back to broken bones and torn wings, to how Taehyung’s freedom had once been ruptured from him, and how he had gained it back.

Jungkook craves to have such rich, privileged freedom like Taehyung has: to be free to go wherever he wants, free to be. The want wrenches in his chest, but it isn't as painful since he has moved to Vanae. It’s tentatively fed, as if it all may be ripped away from him at any minute. It leaves a bittersweet trail on his tongue, sweet because it feels so *good,* bitter because he wants more, yet is too afraid to reclaim his own power.

Jungkook pauses.

He observes the sky, swallowing around the lump that swells in his throat.

Taehyung, who had been yards away from Jungkook, joins him when he must notice Jungkook’s absence. His golden, unreadable gaze falls on Jungkook.

Taehyung drifts away. Jungkook wonders if the dragon will simply discard Jungkook's sudden halt to continue ahead. However Taehyung doesn't leave too far, remaining in front of Jungkook and high up in the sky.

The dragon's maw opens.

Jungkook feels more then he sees the arcanic wind Taehyung breathes. It rushes through the grass, and more specifically through the field of dandelions they have stopped at.

The dandelions' seeds are blown away by Taehyung's wind, the tufts splitting apart and cascading around Jungkook, in the sky and through the stems, across Taehyung's scales and Jungkook's skin.

It's like a rain of fluffy, floating drops.

Jungkook's hand travels in the air, his fingers brushing upon the feathery seeds that disperse around him, kept in motion by the wind Taehyung continues to breathe out, and still suspended in time when Taehyung's mouth closes.

The ground vibrates beneath Jungkook's shoes when Taehyung lands.

Some of the fluffy seeds must reach Taehyung's nose because he sneezes and prompts another cloud of dandelion floaties that quickly surrounds him. He sneezes a second time, a third, a fourth, and it's endless because every time Taehyung sneezes, more fluffy seeds are spread in the air.

A brawl begins between Taehyung and the dandelions.

Jungkook trips on the ground from the giggles and snorts and more laughs that rack through him, his stomach cramping.

Clearly fed up after sneezing perhaps 25 times in a row, Taehyung breathes out a cone of fire and burns the dandelion seeds to a crisp.

"You destroyed a field of dandelions!" Jungkook objects but his berating is rendered null by the chuckles that intersect his words.

Taehyung snorts flames through his nostrils. He shakes his head and glances down under him, then at Jungkook and back down again.

Jungkook understands the requests and approaches Taehyung, now standing beneath Taehyung's chest.

With his gnarled, white index, Taehyung uses the tip of his claw to cut the stems. He dislodges a tiny part of the soil, digging through it. Jungkook can't figure out how Taehyung does it, really, because for the gargantuan size of Taehyung's dragon form, he still manages to muster an uncanny gentleness in his movements. It must require an incredible amount of training, and questions already flicker in Jungkook's mind.

Taehyung pulls his talon back when his job is seemingly done. Jungkook crouches and examines the soil.

A small, barely noticeable seed sprouts from the soil, a green leaf at the top.

“Ooh. Is the ground filled with dandelion seeds?” Jungkook asks and Taehyung nods. “That means we can come back here later when they’re yellow? They’ll grow in summer, right? They do in Amaris.” Taehyung nods again. Jungkook tucks the seed under the soil, patting the little bump and wishing the flower a good growth.

The next field they walk through is one of deep azure flowers.

Taehyung points at them, then at the sky.

Jungkook’s head lolls to the side, unsure on what Taehyung means. A flash of understanding flickers in him a few seconds later. “Are those lapis?” Taehyung bobs his chin in confirmation. “Can I take some?” Taehyung nods again and Jungkook plucks some of the lapis, taking one every few minutes so as to not leave an empty patch in the middle of the field.

Jungkook and Taehyung’s journey is slow as the sun descends more and more, the sky painted in purple, orange and pink hues. The walk is unexpectedly comforting, with Taehyung flying by Jungkook’s side, where Jungkook makes Taehyung's freedom a bit of his own.

Jungkook shouts Taehyung’s name a couple hours later, complaining about sore feet. Taehyung lowers to rest his right talon on the ground, palm up for Jungkook to climb and sit on.

Taehyung flies off, faster than the rhythm he had adopted while Jungkook had been walking.

The wind rushes past Jungkook’s cheeks and it’s not cold, the winter breeze lessened by the bubble of warmth the talon encases him in.

A familiar forest soon appears.

Taehyung descends at a clearing near his parents house and lets Jungkook climb down. Taehyung shifts and falls from a couple yards high, landing on his feet.

Jungkook beams at Taehyung.

He clasps his hands behind his back and lightly leans forward, feeling strangely coy now that Taehyung is back to his human self. “That was so much fun.”

“Flying is amazing,” Taehyung smiles and after grabbing his and Jungkook belongings, he marches off, Jungkook trailing after him.

“I meant the whole date in general.”

“Not a date.”

“Shush,” Jungkook says and links elbows with Taehyung.

Jungkook smiles when he catches Revna through the kitchen’s window, the basilisk curled around Jimin’s neck. His smile drops when a forgotten matter springs to mind.

“Wait. We need to talk about something.” Jungkook pulls Taehyung back into the forest, away from the house. “I was supposed to tell you while we were at the cave but it slipped my mind.”

“What is it?” Taehyung frowns.

“There’s something that has been bothering me about what happened at the manor.” Jungkook shuffles in front of Taehyung.

“What?”

“You remember the shrill? Yumi’s lizard?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“How did it feel when it sang that song?”

“Like something was tearing me apart over and over again,” Taehyung describes. “It was as if the sound waves were echoing the pain everywhere: in my limbs, my skin, my breath pouch. In every cell of my body. Why?”

“Can we safely assume that the shrill only affects dragonborns?”

“I think so? How did it feel for you?”

“Like a simple loud noise. It wasn’t particularly painful at all.”

“It was horribly painful for me. It even forced me back to my human self. It clearly was the same for the pig and the other dragonborns.”

“I’m a warlock, Yumi too, and we were both fine during the shrill, so the song doesn’t work on humans nor warlock.”

“I don’t have a damn clue why we’re talking about this.”

Jungkook’s gaze locks with Taehyung’s. “Assuming the shrill *only* works on dragonborns.”

“Yes.”

“Why was Revna affected by it?”

“Lonely.”

“What?”

“Revna is lonely.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Baby.”

Revna snuffs.

“I think she misses Taehyung and Jungkook,” Pretty Dragon says and Revna nods.

Pretty Dragon is smart and understands Revna well.

“Do you want to go see them?” Pretty Dragon asks.

Revna nods again and slides down his body to land on the ground. ***“Revna wants Kookie. And Taetae. Revna go?”***

Funny Dragon and Pretty Dragon talk about Kookie, saying that he will be back soon. But Revna is impatient and misses Kookie. She’s irritated and wants to go. Now.

So Revna goes.

The house is warm. The forest is cold. Revna shivers and hisses. The freezing winter is annoying. It always makes her cold, but Revna is more lonely than cold.

Slither, slither, slither, Revna sings in her head.

Revna follows the bond. It’s easy to feel Kookie but even if it wasn’t, she’s a good hunter. Kookie had taught her when she was little, and Revna remembers. So Revna hunts Kookie! Hunting is fun. She won’t bite Kookie though. She loves him too much.

She moves across the leaves.

Rustle. Hiss.

Sniff, sniff.

Kookie is nearby.

Revna scents a bunny. She listens.

Hop, hop. Sniff. Hop, hop, hop. Slither. Hop, hop, hop, ho—

Revna lunges and bites. She eats the bunny. She’s not hungry but she loves hunting, and Kookie always says that it’s bad to waste food. Hunting is more fun when Kookie is here to kiss and praise. Maybe Taetae will praise Revna too. Taetae is funny, but not as much as Funny Dragon. Taetae always frowns and grumbles and Kookie makes fun of him too.

Revna likes Taetae. Taetae smells nice and familiar since she first met him. Kookie likes Taetae as well, so Revna trusts Taetae. Plus Taetae had helped and saved Kookie. Revna had been scared at the big, dark house, but Taetae had been there and Kookie had been strong.

Voices erupt in front of her.

Revna can feel the bond thrum alive.

“*What?”* Taetae says. “What do you mean she was affected by it?”

“Kookie! Kookie, Kookie, Kookie!”

“When the shrill happened, she was writhing on the ground. She was *genuinely* in pain, Taehyung, and even if—” Kookie’s head turns toward Revna. He grins. “Lovely!”

Revna clicks her tongue, too happy to speak as Kookie crouches down to take her in his arms and hug her. Revna loves cuddles.

“You just ate something, uh? Your belly is all round.”

“Revna eat a bunny! Hop, hop, hop!”

“You’re the best hunter in the world,” Kookie coos but Taetae makes a noise. “She is, you prick.”

“Revna missed Kookie.”

“I’m sorry, Lovely. I know you don’t like it when we’re separated,” Kookie says and rubs his forehead against Revna’s.

“It’s okay. Revna was with Funny Dragon and Pretty Dragon.”

“Ah yes, I’m sure Seokjin and Jimin spoiled you a lot,” Kookie says and begins to walk toward the house.

“Yes.” Revna coils around Kookie's neck to dart her tongue at his cheek. Kiss, kiss. ***“Revna prefers Kookie.”***

“I sure hope I’m your favorite one. I raised you."

“Ruby is with Pretty Dragon. Can Taetae have the necklace?”

“Taehyung?”

“Hm?”

“Revna wants to know if you’re fine with wearing the necklace.”

“Sure.”

Revna dances, her body undulating.

Kookie and Taetae are walking close to each other, so Revna drifts from Kookie’s shoulders to curl around Taetae’s. Revna moves her head in front of Taetae.

Taetae is pretty like Kookie.

Revna bumps her snout against Taetae’s.

“Why does she keep doing that to me?”

“Because she likes you,” Kookie explains and Revna nods. “It’s the equivalent of a kiss.”

“Revna likes Taetae, even if Taetae is silly.”

Kookie laughs and Revna does too.

“The fuck did she say?”

“She said she likes you even if you’re an idiot, which is quite relatable.”

“Fuck off. Both of you." Taetae glares at Revna but she can tell he doesn’t mean it.

Revna snuffs and clicks her tongue, happy and laughing as Taetae walks her to the house.

Revna likes this better.

She didn’t like fighting at the spooky house. Everything had been painful. A lot. Revna’s head had hurt the most. She had thought she had died because of how much it'd hurt. She remembers being in pain like this before but it’s blurry. Her memories are always blurry and a mess since Evil tried to hurt Kookie’s mind.

But Evil isn’t here anymore.

She’s far away, so Kookie and Revna are safe.

And Taetae and the dragons are here now if Evil tries to hurt Kookie, or if Ugly Dragon tries to touch Kookie.

Revna is here too, she thinks and watches Kookie smile while he talks to Taetae.

Kookie is smiling a lot. It’s good. Revna likes when Kookie is happy.

Happy Kookie makes Revna happy.

Chapter End Notes

You’re having two chapters this week!! This one today and the next one Sunday so that I can get back on track with my schedule of one chapter per week during the weekend hehe, chap 19 will be on the shorter side (but then again, chapter 18 was supposed to be on the shorter side as well and yet… :’))

I hope you enjoyed this calm interlude, things are about to move starting chap 19 😈
Comments are always appreciated and huge motivation so feel free to leave me some it will make me: very happy 🥹🤍 You will once again be rewarded with forehead kisses 🤲🤍

PS: do you have any theories about Revna? 🧐

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

The fields

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ A SLB video trailer made by wernot7withyou3

❧ Art of Taekook carving in the cave made by Mosy96
❧ Art of Jungkook and dragon Taehyung made by jeonikcs

❧ Moodboard of Taekook made by Crystal00608593
❧ A moodboard of Taekook at the flower field made by kookvrkive
❧ A moodboard made by BambiKoo_12

❧ A logo for SLB made by jkcxthv97
❧ Edit of a storm globe made by jkcxthv97
❧ Art of Taekook made by jkcxthv97

Chapter 19: The Council Meeting

Chapter Summary

> The first meeting with the members of the Council happens, and Jungkook doesn't know what to expect from it.

Chapter Notes

> Not really a song rec but I was listening to this while writing the scene that starts at "Jungkook doesn't really understand what happens at first, his thoughts muddled…", up until the end of that scene.
>
> Enjoy this chapter It's one of my fav I've written with chapter 17 and idek why 😭🤍
>
> ❧ Twitter
>
> **Cw:**
>
> **1) Blood**
> **2) Violence**
> **3) Fist fight**
> **4) Slur in one instance where a character refers to another as a 'slut'**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Taehyung!"

Jungkook waits, however when no reply comes, he shouts again.

"Taehyung!"

"What?!"

"Can you come upstairs?!"

Jungkook and Taehyung haven't gotten the chance to continue their discussion regarding Revna. Taehyung has been mostly absent, handling an emergency with his hunting squadrons, while Jungkook has been occupied with studying and preparing for today's event: the first meeting at the Council.

It's nerve wracking, to say the least. Jungkook has barely managed to sleep last night, both from the remnants of the manor still mangling his slumber, but also because of his mind churning about how

the meeting may unfold.

Jungkook's uncertainty also translates into a conundrum that takes the form of fabrics and gems.

A knock rattles against the door.

Jungkook swings it open to grab Taehyung's wrist and pull him inside his bedroom. They both halt in front of the neatly made bed. "I don't know what to wear," Jungkook declares, in case the dozen of prepared outfits laid atop the mattress aren't enough of an indication.

"Anything is fine."

"You say that but even *you* dressed up."

"I usually don't, but this meeting is the tri-monthly one where some of the most important dragonborn leaders are summoned."

"See? So I *have* to dress well, but nothing feels right, it's annoying me. I don't want to over or under dress."

Taehyung peers at Jungkook. "Why are you asking *me,* of all people? I wear shirts and baggy pants all day long."

Jungkook groans. "I should have asked Seokjin." He closes his eyes and rubs circles on his pounding temples, a migraine rearing its ugly head. He has had to digest so many different kinds of information for the past two days since he and Taehyung have come back from their date that he hasn't gotten a single second to rest.

Jungkook just wants to shut his brain for a moment and not have to think about anything other than breathing.

"Can I go through your clothes?"

Jungkook wordlessly agrees.

Taehyung makes his way toward the walk-in closet and slides open the double doors, stepping inside.

Jungkook plops down on his bed.

Perhaps he should check in with Taehyung if the latter can ask Minsoo about some remedy for migraines. Jungkook has been curious about the elusive grandfather, wondering if he will ever be able to have a proper discussion with the man.

"What kind of impression do you want to leave?"

Jungkook peers at the ceiling, half musing about his answer, half surprised that Taehyung cares to ask. "A good one?"

Taehyung's head peeks out from the walk-in closet to deadpan Jungkook. "Be more specific."

"I don't know," Jungkook shrugs and Taehyung disappears once more. "I want to make a good first impression, but I also want to look good and not… Weak. I don't want to seem weak, if that makes

sense?”

Taehyung is quiet for a while, the sound of rustling clothes floating in the bedroom. When he shows up a few minutes later, it’s with his hands tangled around one of Jungkook’s shirts that he turns this and that way. “What the fuck is that thing?”

Jungkook springs up and snatches it. “It’s a top.”

“How do you put that thing on? And why does it have so many straps?”

“It’s an intricate top with several layers beautifully praised by the proper jewelry and most importantly when worn by *me*,” Jungkook tuts and nicely folds the shirt. “It’s pretty.”

Taehyung seizes the shirt back, messing up Jungkook’s work. “You’d end up strangling yourself trying to put that death trap on."

“Shut up,” Jungkook laughs and smacks Taehyung’s arm. He settles on his bed once more, reclining on his hands and humming to himself while Taehyung rummages through the wardrobe.

Taehyung comes back some time later — *perhaps ten minutes?* —, armed with pieces of fabric. He unceremoniously shoves aside the clothes Jungkook had prepared to lay down the new one he has chosen. “This.”

Jungkook stands and surveys the outfit. “Oh. It’s very to your taste,” he notes with a snort. The attire Taehyung has picked is composed of a red, short top along with black leather pants adorned with some criss-crossing lace where the hips are. "It's simple but quite pretty"

“I know. I picked it.”

“You did…”

Jungkook hadn't even asked Taehyung to pick an outfit for him, yet Taehyung has spontaneously gone out of his way to do so.

A content swoop elevates in Jungkook's chest.

“It’s not very powerful looking though,” Jungkook muses through pursed lips.

“You don’t need an outfit to look powerful. You already are on your own,” Taehyung says, matter-of-factly.

Jungkook’s cheeks heat up. “It’ll be good enough, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think it’s fine if I add some sort of corset jewelry?”

“You can wear whatever you want. Dragonborns will be dressed extravagantly at the Council. If you think something will be too much, chances are it’ll pale in comparison to what is worn there.”

“Alright. Thank you, servant, you may vacate the room,” Jungkook says with a jut of his chin and dismissive motion of his hand. He jolts on his spot when a zap of lightning hits his lower back. “Prick."

Jungkook worries his lower lip to repress a smile as he peers at the attire laid on the bed.

Maybe Jungkook can ask Taehyung to pick some more outfits for him in the future.

As Jungkook changes, there's an unfamiliar satisfaction that rises in him at the idea of wearing an apparel that Taehyung has — seemingly — carefully selected for Jungkook.

He fastens the porcelain corset last, one of his favorite accessories. It's quite heavy and not the kind he'll wear on a daily basis, especially this one that is lined with a golden armature on the edges, rubies engraved in the armature but also dangling from the golden chains framing Jungkook's hips.

Next are the jewelry that Jungkook slides around his right hand, index and ring fingers.

He loves this part of dressing himself up: finding which jewelry will compliment his outfit best, putting them on then off if it does not fit what he wants. It's therapeutic, akin to the self care routine he goes through every morning and night with bathes, creams and more.

Jungkook steps out of his bedroom and climbs down the stairs.

"Because I told you that, 1) you had your 25 minutes per week, 2) it'll look odd if I wear a ruby like this. They know it's not my kind of thing. Some may get curious and ask questions that we would all rather avoid," Taehyung argues as he looks down at Revna.

Revna snuffs and hisses.

Jungkook pauses at the bottom of the stairs, properly taking in Taehyung's outfit.

It's simple, like most things Taehyung wears, however it still differs from the usual casual style.

Taehyung has opted for a pair of black trousers tucked in black boots. An opened suit's vest is draped over his shoulders that displays the white shirt whose collar dips low on his chest, two strings dangling down to his navel. He's also wearing some jewelry, three necklaces attached around his neck that sway in the air when he bends to readjust one of his shoes.

"Taetae is mean." Revna glides up Jungkook's leg to slump around his neck.

"I know you insulted me again so whatever you said isn't true," Taehyung says, who has been chatting more and more with Revna no matter how one-sided the conversations may be.

"She said you're mean," Jungkook translates and slides on his dress shoes. "He can wear the necklace later, alright? It's better if you stay with me."

"Revna is annoyed. Really annoyed. Really, really, really, **really** ***annoyed."***

"I know," Jungkook chuckles. "We'll make it up to you, okay?"

"Okay. Kookie promises?"

"I promise."

Revna vanishes in the ruby.

"How can you breathe in that thing?"

Jungkook glances at Taehyung, catching the way Taehyung's gaze darts up and down Jungkook's form before settling on the corset. "Easily. It was tailored for me."

"Can you even bend forward?"

Jungkook curves forward to show that, yes, he very well can. "Why are you concerned about whether or not I can bend? What kind of wicked realm have your thoughts wandered to, hm?"

Taehyung splutters. "Shut up. 'was wondering if I'll have to carry you around under my arm like a damn statue."

"Well, you don't have to worry about this, so your mind may leave whatever gutter it fell into," Jungkook teases, the hand raised to his mouth doing nothing to conceal his smile.

"You're repulsive," Taehyung grumbles and marches out of the house, Jungkook on his trails as he slings on his winter coat.

Dahee is already outside in her dragon form, grooming one of her wings. She straightens up when Jungkook and Taehyung arrive, and she lightly bumps her snout against Jungkook's chest as a form of greeting. Taehyung shifts as well, and once Jungkook is secured in the palm of Taehyung's talon, the three of them fly off.

Jungkook isn't certain on how to describe the island he, Taehyung and Dahee have landed on after leaving Vanae, however it resembles what a village in a tree would look like.

The outer part of the small island is constituted of not a forest, per se, but rather of a plethora of plants and flowers covering the expense of grass in a lush ecosystem.

The few trees' barks are engraved in beautiful swirls and complex patterns, an alcove carved at the top where a lantern is placed in each tree trunk. Several ponds are scattered around the island as well, surrounded by more flora and haphazard rocks. There's even one in the shape of a ring near the center of where the main public space appears to be.

What prompts a gasp out of Jungkook's mouth is the *gargantuan* tree situated at the far back of the island, so tall that it would most likely take 30 to 40 minutes to reach the peak on foot.

The branches are so vast and wide that they serve as foundations for the buildings built on top. More architecture is dangling from smaller branches — that are still bigger than any tree trunk Jungkook has ever seen —, the huts held up by vines. They have some heavy looking boulders fastened on each corner, most likely to reduce the sway from the wind.

"By the Elders," Jungkook says, and he beams when it elicits a barked out laugh from Taehyung.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?" Dahee says, the three of them walking on a bridge curved over the largest pond on the island, fishes of an abundant array of colors swimming in the water. "I knew you would love this place."

Jungkook smiles at Dahee, happy yet wistful. He’s not accustomed to any maternal figure displaying any kind of care for him. “Breathtaking doesn’t fully encompass the beauty of this island. Everything in dragonborns’ lands is so spellbinding and arcanic.”

Jungkook peers at the head of the immense tree, full of leaves and birds flying amidst the lush crown. He emits a sound of surprise when he notices the equally huge glass dome peeking out of the crown

“The greenhouse is where the meeting is held,” Dahee explains.

“The dome is the greenhouse?”

“Yes. It is equally stunning inside. I love visiting this place when it does not involve prideful and temperamental dragonborns, which is not very often, unfortunately.”

“You've lived with one for 26 years though,” Jungkook jests, the jab not missing its target.

“Unprompted?” Taehyung says with an offense.

Dahee laughs and loops an arm around Jungkook's.

“Taetae!”

“Taetae?!”

A kid who’s probably ten years old runs toward Taehyung, crashing against him in a hug that looks bruising. “It’s been so long, Taetae!”

Taehyung breaks into a bright grin. “Hey, kid.”

“No! Revna doesn’t like it! Taetae is Revna’s!”

Jungkook snickers. “He’s just a kid."

“But Taetae is Revna’s name for Taetae.”

“It’s been a while, Haru,” Taehyung says and ruffles the kid’s hair who releases his hug to glare at him.

“We haven’t gone hunting together in weeks!”

“I was busy. How’s your father? Is he up in the greenhouse already?”

“Yuuup. Mom’s grabbing some food for me, I’m hungry. Dad says you owe him.”

Taehyung scoffs. “We’ll see about that.”

Haru glances at Jungkook. He gasps. “Is he your mate?”

“N—” Taehyung clears his throat. “Yes. Uh. Yes. This is Jungkook.”

“Hi,” Jungkook smiles and waves at the kid who waves back with a toothy grin. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Ooh, he’s prettyyy.” Haru peers back at Taehyung. “How did *you* get a pretty mate?”

Taehyung traps Haru in a headlock to rub his knuckles on Haru's crown. “Is this any way to talk to your elders, huh? Apologize.”

“No! Stop!” Haru says through a laugh. He wrenches himself free and begins to dash away. “Bye Taetae! I have to go to Mom or she’ll kill me!”

“Revna hopes so.”

Jungkook muffles his sound of amusement into his palm, a little more relaxed after Revna's theatrics. He still hooks elbows with Taehyung, sticking close to him both for the pretense they have to maintain, but also to soak into the comfort Taehyung’s presence provides.

The two of them along with Dahee resume their stroll as they walk through a smaller public space.

Jungkook had wondered if he had overdressed after fastening the corset, however he quickly realizes that Taehyung had told the truth this morning.

The dragonborns populating the island are all dressed in various shades of extravagant and luxurious pieces. Some have chosen colorful arrays of clothes, while others have settled on wearing more neutral tones like black, brown or white, yet all embellished one way or another. The styles also differ, and Jungkook understands that the discrepancies come from the fact that the dragonborns present on this island all arrive from different lands.

There’s still a definite contrast between dragonborns and humans, and it resides in the arcanic touch given to the apparels through headpieces or crowns some dragonborns have resting atop their head. A lot of them also have pieces of their dragon counterpart showing up: the wings, the horns, the tail, or everything at once and more, like scales on some faces.

The area isn’t loud like Vanae’s market is. It’s serene, people calmly discussing among themselves.

Jungkook had not noticed it at first, thankfully distracted by the beauty of the place, however many gazes dart toward him.

Some are curious, but he does not miss the way the majority of them are veiled with a wariness that Revna echoes with a hiss. Vanae’s people had been impossibly kind and welcoming, a dichotomy to how aloof and cautious the people on this island are.

Jungkook shuffles closer to Taehyung. His throat is dry. It feels as though each and every move of his is being scrutinized, whether it being the way he walks, holds himself or even breathes, and it does nothing to aid his already gnawing anxiety.

Jungkook straightens his spine nonetheless, smoothing out his expression to the one of Amaris’ prince.

“Follow me for a moment,” Dahee says. “I would like to speak to you both before we enter.”

Jungkook and Taehyung trail after Dahee who leads them to a secluded part of the garden.

Dahee peers at Jungkook, her gaze softening. “How are you feeling, dear?”

Jungkook doesn’t reply right away, taken aback by the inquiry. “Honestly?”

“Always.”

“I’m really nervous,” Jungkook confesses, pinching and tugging on the sleeve of Taehyung’s vest. “I’ve studied for the past couple of days, to make sure I'm ready for this meeting, but it’s— Everything is a lot.”

Dahee reaches out to take Jungkook’s free hand between her own.

Jungkook doesn't know how to respond to the touch, so he freezes on his spot.

“It will be fine, my dear. However, please keep in mind dragonborns’ and humans’ history that is still deeply etched in people’s minds. They will be wary of you at first, as you have noticed already, but they will learn in no time how lovely you are as we all have.”

The churning turmoil in Jungkook’s chest lightens at the words. “Thank you, Dahee.”

“Try not to take their distance to heart.” Dahee pats the back of Jungkook’s hand before letting go. “If Taehyung could warm up to you, so will the Council.”

“Now,” Taehyung starts, “when did I warm up to him, exactly?”

“When you created a storm for him,” Dahee replies without missing a beat.

Taehyung’s mouth opens then closes. He petulantly looks away from his mother who laughs and pats his cheek.

Jungkook’s lips tug upward. Taehyung and Dahee’s love for each other is so palpable and full of mirth.

“As for you, Son, do not be temperamental.”

“You've told me that a hundred times.”

“And how many times have you listened?”

Taehyung purses his lips around an intelligible protest.

“Exactly. What matters is for you both to show a united front, however it is not something that concerns me,” Dahee says with a knowing look Jungkook tilts his head at. “The council meeting is crucial to prove that humans and dragonborns can work together in peace, understood?”

Taehyung nods while Jungkook utters a *‘Yes’*.

“Excellent. Seungwon will be present as well,” Dahee adds. Jungkook had already been made aware of this when he and Taehyung had come back from their date, but he still tenses at the name. “You will not be facing him alone, Jungkook. Not anymore.”

Jungkook smiles, blinking away the stinging in his eyes. “What about my parents?”

“They will not be part of the first council meeting a human is invited to, as requested by Woosung. The Council has not deemed it safe enough yet. As of now, *you* are the bridge between Vanae and Amaris, which I believe to be the better option anyway.”

Jungkook emits a small chuckle. “That’s a lot of pressure."

“It is why Taehyung and I are here,” Dahee says with resolution. Dahee glances at Taehyung. “I will leave you both for a second.”

Jungkook makes a noncommittal noise of surprise and he peers at Taehyung who nods at his mother as she leaves the premises.

“What are you so jittery about?” Taehyung says once his mothers is gone.

“We have to do well.” Jungkook relents his hold around Taehyung’s arm to loosely hug his own chest. “I do.”

“All you have to do is be yourself, and I mean *really* be yourself. Don’t bother with the forged compliance and all that nonsense. They’ll notice and it’ll only make them more distrustful of you. You shouldn't hide who you are.”

“But we still need to show that we have a good relationship, Taehyung.”

The two of them exchange a look.

Taehyung takes Jungkook’s hand to place it around his arm again. “It won’t be that difficult."

They begin to make their way toward the giant tree.

“Why won’t it be difficult?”

“Don’t make me say it."

“I’m not making you say anything. I’m not following."

Taehyung heaves a sigh. He’s quiet for a moment, and when he speaks, his words seem to be wrenched out of his mouth. “We get along okay. So. It’ll be fine.”

“*‘Okay’*. Really now...”

“Fuck off.”

“We get along well, you can say it.”

“I don’t know if us fighting at every breath we take can be described as getting along well.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“And you’re a brat. It’ll be fine. My mom's right. You won’t be there alone even if Seungwon is present too.”

Jungkook doesn’t fully believe this, thinking back on the bathroom incident that had happened at the wedding.

Taehyung has apologized for it, and Jungkook has forgiven him, but it does not take away from the fact that it has left a bruise on Jungkook. This time he won’t assume Taehyung will intervene if Seungwon tries anything. Nurturing no expectations is less disappointing.

“Should we keep a pretense like at the wedding?” Jungkook says.

“Yeah, it’d be for the best.”

“Alright.”

Jungkook and Taehyung join Dahee at the entrance of a flight of short stairs. They walk through a round gate of stones, the path framed by two walls of leaves and flowers.

They soon reach the front of the tree that somehow manages to seem more colossal than it had from afar.

Dahee shifts to her dragon self and grabs some kind of elevator wooden cage where Taehyung leads Jungkook into. She grabs the ropes looped around large metal rings at the top. They leave the ground moments later.

“Oh God.” The flimsy, tattered cage sways, too much for Jungkook’s taste. He turns to face Taehyung, clinging onto the dragonborn’s arms as he presses his forehead against Taehyung’s shoulder. “If I fall, I’ll land on the edge of the bridge and break my spine in half and then I’ll drown. In a *pond.* That’d be so humiliating. And then the fish will devour my body. While I’m alive.”

“Once again: why must you be like this.”

“It’s a possibility.”

“The possibility of you dying because I burnt your deranged ass is more feasible than the one of you breaking your spine because you fell."

“Can you shut up?”

“We’re up.”

“Already?”

“Yes, come on.”

Jungkook does not budge, rooted on his spot by the fear of dying a gruesome death. The possibility becomes real when his feet leave the ground and *oh my God.*

He’s actually falling.

To prevent the snap of his spine, a drowning, and then a horrible demise because the fishes will *eat him*, Jungkook climbs onto the first thing his body finds: his husband. His hands clutch at Taehyung’s neck, his legs locking around Taehyung’s waist in a tight grip.

“I almost died.”

“You didn’t."

"I did."

Taehyung appears to be moving because Jungkook feels like he’s the one to do so.

“I genuinely almost died.”

“You did not.”

“My feet left the floor. I nearly broke every bone in my legs and God what if a bone in my thigh had pierced through my chest?”

“I lifted you because you weren’t moving, dumbass.”

Oh.

“Oh.”

Oh.

That makes a lot more sense.

Like the hands cupping Jungkook's hips that he only realizes the presence of now.

Jungkook lifts his head from where it had been buried in Taehyung’s neck to peer at the dragonborn. The problem is that he, once again, badly estimates the distance because his and Taehyung’s nose bump against each other. Taehyung doesn’t jerk away as Jungkook expects him to, and he understands why when a clear of throat erupts behind him.

Jungkook’s head swivels around to see Dahee and dozens of dragonborn staring at him and Taehyung.

While Jungkook’s legs are locked around Taehyung’s waist in a compromising position.

Jungkook scrambles to his feet. He steps away from Taehyung as an embarrassed heat crawls up his neck.

“Okay," Jungkook whispers. "Okay. This is a hundred times more humiliating than dying in a pond of fishes. It’s the worst first impression possible,” he mumbles in his palms that raise to cover his face, his back to the rest of the room. He must not speak quietly enough because some chuckles elevate in the area.

“Dumbass."

Jungkook lowers his hands to peer at Taehyung. He mustn't hide his rising anxiousness very well because Taehyung's gaze softens the lightest bit.

“It’ll be fine,” Taehyung assures.

Jungkook nods and turns around. A hand sprawls on his lower back, warm and secure, and he tucks himself against Taehyung’s side.

The greenhouse is even more immense once inside.

The interior is as full of plants as the island has been, the sunlight basking the area through the windows that cover and surround the room in makeshift walls and ceiling. Grass blankets the entirety of the floor except for the center part of the room where a circle of polished, shiny wood is, the sky reflecting on it through the windows.

Jungkook notices that Dahee has landed them on a platform stretching outside of the dome, right where an opened arc is.

There's a table in a ring shape in the middle of the floor. It holds another pond at its core, with water so dark that it seems to absorb the sunlight. Something moves in the pond, the water oscillating.

This is a lot more intimidating than Jungkook had expected it to be.

The dragonborns in the room, around 25 of them, half women and half men at least, all emanate a certain poise and assurance. Perhaps it's in the way they carry themselves, chin held high, shoulders relaxed, and attire elegant; or perhaps it's due to the plethora of jewelry and accessories some are wearing, a few having even adorned their horns with chains and dangling gems that sway when their head twists to survey Jungkook.

More than a couple dragonborns have evident battle scars: two people missing a limb, another both eyes that are covered by a beautiful mask, while one is rolled inside the room in a wheelchair.

They're all sitting at the table, their attention riveted on the new arrival.

Jungkook grips onto Taehyung as Taehyung walks them to where their seats await them.

What if Jungkook does not have one?

What if they expect him to sit by Taehyung's feet or something equally demeaning? The table is quite crowded already, after all.

God…

Jungkook prays that he has been given a chair and won't have to go through the humiliation of waiting for one.

"You're late," a man says, so burly that he would put Minsoo and Junhyun both to shame. His glare settles on Taehyung.

"Because your son distracted me," Taehyung snips.

The man remains immobile for so long that Jungkook worries a sudden brawl may break out. However, to Jungkook's utmost shock, the man burst into a resounding laugh.

The stands and his throne-like chair similar to every other one surrounding the table scrapes across the wood. He yanks Taehyung into a hug, slamming his hand on Taehyung's back. "It's good to see you again."

Taehyung returns the accolade. "You too, Jihee."

"You owe me," Jihee declares when he breaks the hug.

Taehyung rolls his eyes. "I don't owe you shit."

"I handled your hunting squadrons while you and Dahee were away on your little vacation."

"Wasn't a vacation."

Jungkook would be inclined to agree that nearly dying by the hand of a cruel man isn't quite the relaxing holiday.

Jihee emits a gruff noise, then he peers down at Jungkook because the man is *that* tall. “You must be his human husband.”

“Because he has a dragonborn one?” Jungkook fires back before he can stop himself. He’s about to apologize since the last thing he needs is to anger a dragonborn that could very well squash him with his hands alone, however Jihee barks a roaring laugh.

“I like you already! I’m Jihee." He extends a hand that Jungkook shakes.

Jungkook smiles to hide his wince at the strong grasp. “Jeon Jungkook.”

The ambience had been relaxed so far, however the pronunciation of his name throws a pool of ice in the room.

The idle chats stop, all eyes drifting on him.

“Amaris’ fut—”

“Future king, yeah, yeah, I know the song. The most important question is this one…” Jihee trails off as he towers over Jungkook, his gaze unreadable but framed by bushy eyebrows. “How in hell are you handling *him* as a husband?” He thrusts a thumb in Taehyung’s direction.

Jungkook blinks, disorientated.

“Elders know this child is more temperamental than my wife and she had once grounded me out of the house for three days because I had forgotten to do the dishes. I love her with everything I have, but this woman is a wacky one, let me tell you that much.”

“I’ll tell her you've said this,” Dahee chirps as she sits down.

Jihee swivels to march toward Dahee. “Now, now,” he nervously laughs. “Let’s not get hasty, aye?”

“Then watch your tone while speaking about your mate, Jihee."

“Aye, aye, apologies, Lady Dahee.” Jihee draws a small bow then walks back toward Jungkook that he leans closer to. “Careful with this family. Junhyun is the only nice one.”

Jungkook lifts a hand to cover his smile, surprisingly liking the talkative man. “I’ll be careful.”

“If you ever need help with him,” Jihee adds with a nod in Taehyung’s direction, “feel free to come to me.”

“I can handle my husband just fine,” Jungkook states.

A silence floats in the room, broken by some whistles a few dragonborns make, then punctuated by laughs and clapping.

“I’ll be damned!” Jihee booms. “A human with a spine,” he says and smacks a hand on Jungkook’s shoulder. *It hurts*. “I like you already. You’ll fit in just fine.”

Jungkook's smile is real this time, feeling more welcome at Jihee's friendliness. He's led to his own seat by Taehyung's hand on his back. Taehyung tugs the chair for Jungkook who settles down, Dahee on Jungkook's right and Taehyung on his left.

"Has everyone arrived?" A man says that Jungkook knows to be Woosung according to Dahee's earlier explanation.

"Haneul is missing. Seungwon and Woobin as well."

"We will wait for them." Woosung makes his way toward the opening in the table where a chair is settled between the two ends. The robe, embellished by lace-like patterns on the shoulders and collar, swirls behind him.

Woosung stops at the edge of the dark pond. He draws a dagger.

Jungkook's brows fly up his forehead when the dragonborn slashes at the inside of his palm.

Blood spills from the wound, the drops trickling in the pond when Woosung extends his arm. The *thing* that resides in the water appears to be galvanized by the blood because it moves in it, the water sloshing against the sides of the table.

Jungkook leans forward, peering down at the water.

He startles when a large talon slams on the table, the claws acute and digging into the wood. The head is next, then the rest of the body that seems to be made of scale and fur both. The creature barely reflects the sunlight, however in the few places where it does, it's in deep carmine hues reminding Jungkook of Revna's eyes.

The creature — *a familiar?* — slowly comes out of the water, entirely black, much larger than the amount of water the pond can contain. Jungkook wonders if the pond is bottomless, or if it perhaps works as another dimension like Revna's ruby does.

Revna hisses. ***"Revna doesn't like. What is this?"***

Jungkook can't reply.

The familiar has wings that flatten over its sides as it fully crawls out of the pond to step over the table and stand behind Woosung. No drop falls, and when Jungkook glances down, the pond is emptied from its water.

The creature is majestic, resembling a dragon yet different, like with the four bright, carmine shaped holes situated on the head. Its wings are more like those of a bird, with feathers that rustle when it shakes its form. The creature opens its mouth, breathing out a red mist that stretches across the room, plastering against the windows before disappearing.

All that Jungkook had been told about Woosung is that the man is the dragonborn supervising the Council. So Jungkook has a plethora of questions to ask, and one of them must show on his face because Dahee whispers in Jungkook's ear.

"It isn't a familiar."

Jungkook peers at her. "Then what?"

“It is his daughter, who was cursed by a warlock.”

Jungkook promptly falls mute after this.

“Thank you, my dear.” Woosung smiles at his daughter who nudges his hands, the blood and wound gone.

Woosung sits on his chair, his daughter behind him, tall and imposing.

Some quiet discussions elevate in the room.

Jungkook’s heart hammers in chest, steady yet loud where it resonates between his ears. His hands shake and he balls them up into fists as he folds his arms over his lap. He sits up straight, crossing a leg over the other, only left to hope that no one can smell his apprehension.

One of the double entrance doors swings open.

A man enters, closing it behind him.

“Right on time, Haneul."

“Apologies for the tardiness,” Haneul says with a grin. He flops down on his chair, situated on the other side of where Jungkook is installed.

Haneul is wearing loose fitted clothes, the buttons of his shirt opened at the front down to the navel. The dragonborn is handsome. *Really* handsome. And he clearly knows it if the way he carries himself with cockiness is any given.

Haneul’s gaze drifts on Jungkook. He emits an appreciative sound. “No one told me Amaris’s prince was so pretty,” Haneul croons with a saccharine smile that does not reach his eyes.

“Haneul. Don’t start,” someone says, one of the few dragonborns that had whistled earlier.

Haneul ignores the man to peer at Taehyung. “Do you like him?”

Taehyung does not answer.

“Has he told you he had accepted my courting in the past?” Haneul says to Jungkook.

The tremors in Jungkook’s hands stop. “Ah, yes. He had mentioned it in passing. I now understand why it never led to anything."

Snorts erupt in the room.

“Ehh, the human prince can bite.” Haneul's smile is unnerving, but it's feeble compared to Dohyun's. “You have quite good taste, Taehyung, even if they may be blinded sometimes.”

“Can it, Haneul,” Jihee interjects who, on the other hand, is slowly earning Jungkook’s trust. “He’s fucking married now.”

“But he obviously doesn’t love his betrothed! Say, Taehyung,” Haneul stars and leans forward on his elbows, resting his chin on his folded hands. “How about a date? I’m sure we have a lot to catch up on, and I would love to hear more about this husband of yours.”

Jungkook is growing more and more pissed off for two reasons: 1), a man is flirting with his husband, 2) said husband hasn't spoken a word against it. Jungkook's eyes glide toward Taehyung to level him with the most glacial stare he can muster.

Taehyung glances back. "What?"

Jungkook opens his mouth, ready to utter a complaint, however he reneges the words before they have the chance to be spoken. "Nothing."

"Don't pay attention to him. He's a cockroach."

"You—" Jungkook looks away from Taehyung. Fighting with him would be a horrible look for Amaris and Vanae's alliance.

Some fingers then a hand cup Jungkook's chin to turn his head, attention now commandeered by Taehyung.

"I mean it. Ignore him," Taehyung says. "He's a pest. You've got nothing to be huffing and puffing about, yeah?"

Jungkook knows the gesture and tenderness in the tone is for the pretense, but something still lurches in chest. "I'm not huffing and puffing," he mumbles.

"You're sulking." Taehyung lowers his hand to place it on Jungkook's lap, his fingers curling around the thigh. not too high.

Although Jungkook wouldn't mind it much if it were Taehyung.

"Because you—"

"Trouble in paradise?" Haneul wonders.

Jungkook internally rolls his eyes. "No, but thank you for your concern."

"Are you—"

"Haneul," Dahee warns. "Quiet."

Haneul's smile drops. He reclines against his chair and rolls one of his rings between his fingers.

The door opens once more.

Seungwon and Woobin enter this time.

Jungkook immediately tenses, however his vigilance falters when he catches the eye patch covering Seungwon's left eye.

"Ugly Dragon hurt?" Revna asks and Jungkook discreetly nods. ***"Revna is happy."***

Jungkook and Taehyung look at each other. No words need to be exchanged for them to communicate, both asking each other if Dohyun is the cause behind the injury.

The other members of the Council also appear to be surprised by Seungwon's appearance, some asking questions that Seungwon dismisses with a glare.

Seungwon sits down, Woobin on his right.

"Now that everyone has arrived, aside from Byunghun who will join us later, the meeting shall begin," Woosung announces. His head turns toward the woman on his left. "You may start."

Jungkook comprehends that the first part of the meeting is designated to going around the table, each leader speaking about their land and any issue or request they have. One mentions needing some provisions, while a second woman covered in gems explains that one of the gem dragons in her island has died.

Jungkook had assumed that every other dragonborn's land would be the same as Vanae's, and he couldn't have been more wrong.

He's fascinated.

He learns more about the leaders that guide their people in so many different ways, each land clearly diversified whether it being in the fauna, the flora, or the inhabitants themselves. One of the dragonborns whose wings are draped over his back says that the series of floating islands that make up his territory has expanded further north east.

Floating islands.

How does it work? Is it due to a warlock or a dragon's arcane? Or perhaps something else entirely? Maybe an artifact? Jungkook does not know and he wonders, an urge to visit every single one of those countries growing in him.

A population of dragonborns apparently only lives in their dragon form, where their houses are all lairs located underneath the ground. Another one, mainly consisting of water dragons, lives in a city underwater.

Jungkook absorbs the information, itching to be back home to open every book Junhyun has.

Jungkook's apprehension has eased now that the attention is driven away from him. The fingers that absentmindedly drum on Jungkook's thigh also help unwind him, so much so that he almost feels comfortable enough to reach out for Taehyung, yet does not dare to.

"Onto Vanae next."

Jungkook stills.

"My mother's hunting squadrons along with mine have been providing our people and the more destitute lands with half of our hunts," Taehyung begins and he carries on by mentioning minor issues, Dahee not interrupting once.

Another leader pipes up, speaking about the lack of preys in their island, and how they will need more provisions to last for the winter, a problem that Taehyung solves by assuring that his hunting squadrons' next hunts will be urgently given to them, and that he will create a squadron specifically designated to help this island.

Jungkook surveys Taehyung, taken by the way Taehyung carries himself, by how Taehyung talks with confidence yet respectfully listens to the other leaders and chips in with his own suggestions.

Jungkook has never really gotten to see Taehyung's leadership in action, and a flame of curiosity flickers in him.

"Jungkook," Woosung calls.

Jungkook's gaze tears away from Taehyung to settle on the man.

"It is a pleasure to have you with us today, and to finally make your acquaintance. I have heard a great deal about you."

"You have?" Jungkook says, his voice taking a higher intonation.

"I may have raved about a certain lovely boy once or twice," Dahee smiles with a wink.

Jungkook flushes.

"I have personally consorted with Amaris' rulers, Seohyung and Sungmin, and I must admit that I was quite nonplussed by my visit," Woosung confesses. "You appear to be more… open-minded than your parents."

Jungkook immediately grasps onto the direction of the conversation. He chooses to be upfront. "I believe it is more important to focus on the fact that I will become Amaris' future leader alongside Taehyung, rather than on Seohyung and Sungmin who will soon not have a say in how Amaris is guided."

"You speak like you want to overthrow your parents," Jihee says.

"I would not say overthrow, however I will sit on the throne that is mine." Jungkook peers at Woosung. "May I speak with perhaps blunt yet genuine honesty?"

"It is always recommended to do so, Jungkook," Woosung says. "More so since my daughter excels at unraveling lies."

Jungkook nods and he smiles when he peers at the dragon behind Woosung. "If I may advise you in regard to Amaris, I recommend working with me rather than with my parents. Seohyung and Sungmin's intents through this wedding and spot at the Council are quite obscure to me, where—"

"Fucking told you those humans were no good," someone interrupts.

"Some humans aren't good," Jungkook agrees and peers at the woman, "however *I* strive to bring greatness to Amaris and Vanae's people. I seek to strengthen the peace between humans and dragonborns."

"Do you believe your parents share the same view?" Another leader says.

"I'm not certain," Jungkook opts to say, a safer answer than a flat no.

"I see. It confirms what I had grasped during my visits. I believe Amaris' current rulers may have ill-intentions toward dragonborns," Woosung declares, and Jungkook has never been more glad to have chosen truthfulness over deceptive lies.

An expected uproar explodes in the greenhouse.

“Then why is he here!”

“You are putting all of us in danger with this foolish marriage!”

“Why allow Vanae’s union with Amaris?!”

“This is madness.”

Woosung’s daughter growls, the sound rumbling in the air.

Everyone quietens.

“There is a reason why Seohyung and Sungmin have not been made aware of today’s meeting. Do not mishear my words. Amaris’ *current* rulers may not have dragonborns’ best interests in mind." Woosung's gaze drifts across the leaders before settling on Jungkook. “I was curious to see what Amaris’ heir is like, if he shares his parents ideology or not, so I appreciate your candor, Jungkook. It is quite refreshing after witnessing your parents’ dishonesty and the lies they have fed to me and my daughter.

"It may seem odd, however I beg of you to not consider Seohyung and Sungmin as representatives of what my land and my people yearn for," Jungkook says, praying that Seohyung hasn't ruined his marriage already. "I am to be their leader, Taehyung as well, and *this* is what matters at present.”

“You’d betray your own family?” A man harshly asks.

Yes.

“Not once have I said that.”

“It sounds like you want to.”

“I strongly believe in leading, not ruling. My parents are rulers. I am not,” Jungkook says, an echo of what Taehyung had once said. “It is time for Amaris to be led, which is what its alliance with Vanae will provide once I have taken the crown.” Jungkook is relieved that neither Taehyung or Dahee are trying to intervene. He wants to handle this part of the discussion on his own.

“That I certainly agree with,” Woosung says. “Amaris’ union with Vanae will prove itself to be a great show of mutual trust.”

“Trust?” Haneul scoffs. “How do we know this human can be trusted?”

“We don’t. For now. Which is what this marriage is for." Woosung punctuates the words with a chastising look aimed at Haneul. "However Vanae’s leaders have already put their faith in Jungkook, and that is to keep in mind."

“What decision have you made?” Jungkook worries for a second that he may be speaking out of turn, but this meeting has been a lot more laid-back than any other one Jungkook has participated in while visiting other human cities.

“I, along with the other members of the Council, will place our trust in you as we had agreed upon when we had first debated about Vanae and Amaris’ union,” Woosung declares.

“What about his parents?”

“That is a discussion for another day. This marriage has only just been sealed. We must exert patience.”

Most dragonborns at the table nod, all darting glances at Jungkook, some placated, others holding a tamed hostility.

“Continuing with Jihee…”

Jungkook relaxes in his seat as Woosung exchanges with Jihee. He exhales through his nose and reclines against the backrest of his chair. His hands that had been stilled while speaking with Woosung imperceptibly begin to tremble again.

Dahee’s hand covers them, squeezing them once. “You’ve done well. Remarkably well, dear.”

Jungkook bites back his smile.

A couple hours trickle by before every leader has spoken.

Someone enters the room at some point.

The man has long hair attached in a ponytail that reaches his lower back. Most dragonborns bow to him.

Jungkook does not. Firstly because he’s human and believes that he can get away with it without causing any trouble. Secondly because something about the man doesn’t inspire Jungkook a sliver of trust, and Taehyung’s fingers that tighten around Jungkook’s thigh confirms his wariness.

The man that Jungkook supposes to be Byunghun sits on his chair, Woosung nodding at him before resuming.

“There is an important matter I would like to graze upon today as well, one related to both humans and dragonborns, the latter perhaps more."

"What is?"

"Activity has been detected in Kaiya.”

A rush of surprise runs through the room.

Jungkook has heard of Kaiya in passing, of this piece of land that had first belonged to dragonborns but had then become a place where humans were allowed to go through and use, linking Amaris and Vanae together before the two lands had acquired those names.

Kaiya used to be utilized as a way for humans and dragonborns to communicate on a neutral ground, however the Great War had found its starting point there and had rendered its forest inhospitable, said to be hunted by souls of those that have died there.

“Kaiya?”

“The last time I've heard this name was decades ago through my grandparents,” an old dragonborn says.

“What kind of activity?”

“Elder Miseon has visited the forest, one of the very few allowed to do so. She said the forest appears to be mourning. Angered.”

“Kaiya is always mourning,” Taehyung frowns. “Thousands of humans and even more dragonborns have died there. So what is it mourning this time?”

“One of its guardians.”

“Guardians?” Jungkook blurts out then closes his mouth. “My apologies.”

“You are more than welcome to express yourself as you wish, Jungkook,” Woosung says with a kind smile. “Even if humans had once been allowed to step through Kaiya’s forest, it is dragonborn territory, a its guardians have always been dragonborns. Most of them have succumbed during the war, however the two that have survived are protected and kept alive by the forest. They have been for centuries. The sudden and seemingly inevitable death of one of its guardians is uncanny.”

“Death from old age, perhaps?”

“Kaiya has constantly saved its protectors from dying in such a manner,” Woosung mulls over.

Could it be the plague?

Jungkook does not need to look at Taehyung or Dahee to know that their thoughts have drawn similar conclusions.

“We are worried about what may happen if Kaiya loses both of its last guardians. Since it technically resides in Vanae’s land, I will ask you to investigate this matter as soon as possible,” Woosung says while peering at Dahee and Taehyung. “You will be given any aid you may need.”

“How dangerous could Kaiya become?”

“We do not know. However we will hopefully learn more after Vanae’s searches.”

Woosung diverts the conversation to another subject.

Time passes by.

Discomfort still lingers within Jungkook, made worse by Haneul’s stare that he feels on the side of his head.

Jungkook stares back. He doesn’t want to oppose a dragonborn leader for no reason, but he also does not want to fold in half because a childish man is refusing to learn his place.

The palm that had been cupping Jungkook's thigh moves to grab his wrist, wrapping around it for a moment before it slides upward, the fingers tangling with Jungkook’s. Jungkook peers at Taehyung whose nose is furled around a glower, his glare born onto Haneul.

Haneul is the one to avert his gaze first when he glances down at Jungkook and Taehyung’s intertwined hands.

Jungkook props an elbow on the armrest, supporting his head on the back of his hand. When his and Haneul's gazes collide anew, Jungkook's lips curl upward.

His smile grows when Haneul's vanishes.

"…with Runalis."

Jungkook focuses back on the conversation at the name of the city.

Woosung sighs, slumping in his chair, and his daughter lowers her head to press her snout against his cheek. "They are the next human land to associate with dragonborns, however we have been unable to come to an agreement thus far."

"May I ask how so? I have worked quite often with them, perhaps I could help," Jungkook offers.

"Greed is the reason why figuring out the terms of the arrangement has been exceedingly difficult," Woosung frowns.

"Ain't that every fucking human," Seungwon interjects and glares at Jungkook with his one eye.

Jungkook ignores him. "Runalis' rulers are quite avid for more indeed, however they are also incredibly impressionable and... Hm... Simple." *'Stupid'* would be a more proper adjective, and the leaders must understand the underlying meaning of his choice of words because some of them smile.

"Just throw coins and gems at them." Seungwon nods toward the woman covered in precious stones. "She can provide you with some."

"We have attempted this, however as Jungkook wisely noted, they always ask for more. We can only bend to their will so much before the arrangement reaches a point where we lose rather than gain," Woosung notes.

"Why are we discussing this while *he* is here," Seungwon snips.

"Because he is Amaris' prince. He has not lied once since he has arrived here. While I do not trust him yet, as it must be earned, I am willing to." Woosung settles a firm gaze on Seungwon. "We must nurture good relationships with leaders' descendants, as they are to join this Council one day, like your son."

Seungwon, as he commonly does, continues to run his mouth about how Jungkook's presence at the Council is damaging. No one stops him, seemingly used to the dragonborn's tantrums.

"Nevertheless, the human shouldn't be allowed at this table while we're discussing other human cities," Seungwon concludes.

"It would do you well to remember that this human is my husband, and future leader of Vanae," Taehyung interjects, who had been quiet up till now. "If someone has his place here, it's him."

Jungkook tries to stave off his shock. He fails, his head darting toward Taehyung.

Taehyung is *actually* defending Jungkook.

“He’s not a leader. He is a w—” Seungwon’s jaw clenches around the word he refrains to say. “He’s arm candy.”

Taehyung opens his mouth to speak, however Jungkook stops him.

Jungkook's lips draw a forged smile that he is certain Taehyung sees through. “May I, dear?”

Taehyung nods.

Jungkook's head turns to survey the pig. “Your plan, Seungwon, is abysmal, which only comes as a partial surprise to me."

Some coughs and clear of throats elevate in the room, while a snicker does from where Dahee is seated.

Seungwon scowls at Jungkook. “Beg your pardon?”

“Begging could get you what you want, as you will come to learn soon, however I believe you are unfortunately too prideful for this," Jungkook continues. "As you’ve said, Runalis is greedy, but money and gems will only temporarily work. The most important matter that must be noted regarding Runalis’ rulers is that they crave what they can’t have. They want the impossible to become possible, and this overpasses any mundane material gain you may grant them.”

“What do you suggest, Jungkook?” Dahee wonders.

“Two long winded trades.”

“That’s not any different from anything else that was proposed at this table,” someone derisively says.

“The trades in question are two you must influence toward them rather than enforce. Most importantly, you must show them that what you are offering is something that only dragonborns possess. It'll have Runalis' rulers believe they're special,” Jungkook explains.

“Like what?”

Jungkook hums, glancing over the table. He grabs the spoon he had been using to twirl the coffee that had been served earlier. “This, for example.”

“This ridiculous boy,” someone snarls. “Take him out. I am done entertaining that human.”

“No, no,” the woman with the gems says and shushes the man. “I want to hear.”

Jungkook rises on his feet and he walks toward one of the displays of plants where a glass bell is encasing a rose. He takes it along with the wooden sculpture of a dragon before walking back to his chair. He places the glass bell over the spoon.

“Let’s say you are a thief. You walk inside a room and notice this spoon at the far back, encased underneath this glass bell," Jungkook resumes. "You would wonder what makes this spoon special enough to be under a protective glass. Or perhaps you'll believe it has been put there by accident, or as a joke a previous thief has made. What if we add something else in this room? Objects of a high value, like an array of the most precious gems known to mankind: diamonds.” Jungkook removes

one of his earrings to place it in front of the glass bell. “If you were to choose between the diamonds and the spoon, what would you pick?”

“The diamond!” Jihee excitedly exclaims.

“The diamond as well.”

“The diamond indeed,” Woosung says with a grin.

“Exactly. It’s common sense. The spoon will raise questions, however not enough to divert you from the diamonds. Now...” Jungkook trails off as he places the dragon figure between the earring and the glass bell. “What if we add a guardian protecting the spoon and the spoon *only?* The beast does not care about the diamonds. It would watch as the thief would take the precious gems, however whenever the thief would step closer to the spoon, the beast would retaliate. In this scenario, if you are to steal the diamonds or the spoon, which one would you pick?”

Most people say the spoon this time.

“Why is that?”

“Because the beast is protecting the spoon, meaning that the spoon has a higher value than all the diamonds combined,” the woman with the gems says, her eyes widened.

“Yes. What matters is that the thief is made to believe that the spoon is special, that it is an incredible artifact worthy of attention. You create an illusion or worth. You bend reality.”

“What if the thief learns that the spoon is fake later on? It’ll bring dire repercussions,” someone retorts.

Jungkook nearly scoffs. “If you start a deal with failure in mind, you’ll never succeed."

“But what *if?”*

“No repercussions will happen because the spoon isn’t fake. It is simply not as good as the thief assumed it to be, and it is entirely their fault. The beast and spoon work as a decoy to protect the diamonds. But the spoon *is* special. It can for example allow you to eat from one meal for days because it never empties the plate.”

“The thief will feel tricked,” Seungwon spits. “It’s a stupid fucking plan.”

You're the stupid fucking thing here, Jungkook thinks but does not utter the childish rebut.

“I know they’ll feel tricked, and that is the whole point. The first trade serves one sole purpose: a foundation for the second trade,” Jungkook says. “After you’ve effectively damaged the thief's confidence, you must help them build it back up. You give an advantageous offer with assets beneficial enough to make both the spoon and diamonds seem unimportant. Their expectations will be lowered after the spoon affair, while their assurance will have grown because of how they will be certain that *they* have tricked *you*. If it somehow does not suffice, subtle threats can be given.” Jungkook peers at Seungwon. “Subtlety is the art of being discreet.”

“You fucking—”

“Runalis has everything to win, but very few to lose, and that is something you should capitalize on,” Jungkook continues, discarding Seungwon’s umpteenth tantrum. “During the trade, ideally you want to ask for something so absurd and excessive that it will prompt yells. Something that you *know* they will disagree with. Then, you go down from there until you reach your initial desired demand. It’s simple marketing.”

“Uhm, if I may, Jungkook.” Jihee raises a hand and strokes his full beard with the other. “I have no clue what you just said,” he blurts out and some laughs trail after.

Jungkook chuckles. “Let’s say you initially want 20 rubies from the thief. Your first demand is 100 rubies. The thief immediately refuses. So you agree to negotiate. You lower your demand. Again, and again, and again, to a point where the thief will feel like *they* are the one about to bag the exchange of the century. *This* is what will give them back their confidence. It’ll have them believe they've outsmarted you. They will have forgotten about the spoon trick, which will cloud their judgment. If you’re good, you’ll end up with more than 20 rubies, maybe 50. If you’re bad, you’ll come out with your desired 20 rubies. And if you’re *really* bad... Well. Don’t be.”

“And if you’re really good?” Taehyung questions.

Jungkook peers at him. “You ask for 200 rubies and get them.”

Taehyung smiles.

It isn’t the same one that he had given to Jungkook at the cave. This one is brighter but also has a wicked edge to it and something else Jungkook can’t pinpoint. It nearly looks like pride, but it can’t be.

Taehyung tongues at his cheek and watches Jihee.

The two of them burst into laughter.

“Holy fuck!” Jihee starts.

“Fucking hell,” Taehyung joins after. “I fucking told you, didn’t I?”

“He shut y’all’s mouths,” Jihee exclaims with a gravelly laugh as he points at the rest of the room. “Aye, my boy.” He playfully flutters his lids at Jungkook. “I may be falling in love, what will I say to my wife?”

Dahee giggles. Jungkook hides his smile behind his hands and he slumps in his seat, hoping to divert the attention away from him. Taehyung drapes an arm over the back of Jungkook’s chair, his smile now adorning a pompous curve.

“I quite like Jungkook’s plan,” Woosung agrees with a chuckle. “You could perhaps accompany me during my next visit to Runalis.”

Jungkook rests his clammy palm on Taehyung’s leg. “It would be my pleasure.”

“You have yet to address your absence from your hunting squadrons for nearly a week,” Byunghun interjects, and the mirth that had floated in the room vanishes at the icy tone. “You have forsaken your responsibilities.”

Taehyung's jaw ticks as he removes his vest and props it on the back of Jungkook's chair. “A problem arose."

“Anything to be explained here or in private with me?” Woosung worries.

“No. It was personal.”

“Strange coincidence that an unprecedented problem arises after being married to a human, huh?” A leader says.

“What happened, Taehyung? Got taken again?” Seungwon taunts.

“Watch your mouth, pig,” Dahee seethes.

“Seungwon, unless you wish to be dismissed for the remainder of the meeting, I suggest you be respectful of your peers and keep outside of this door any festering feud,” Woosung warns.

Jungkook surveys Taehyung whose sullen gaze eases when he peers at him. Jungkook mouths a *‘Storm’* but Taehyung shakes his head.

From that point onward, Jungkook does not participate in the meeting anymore, preferring to observe those around him and catalog them in categories of ‘ally’, ‘neutral’, and ‘potential enemy’. So far, only six out of the thirty or so leaders have entered the ‘ally’ column, like Jihee, the woman with the gem, or this old woman that has been giving kind smiles to Jungkook.

A break is granted after another hour.

Jungkook walks toward the concave wall of bay windows, peering outside and admiring the view while taming down the impulse to punch Haneul square across the face who has thrown a smirk at Jungkook on his way.

“Is this about Seungwon?”

Jungkook does not spare a glance at Taehyung. “Hm?”

“You’re sulking. Why?”

“I’m not sulking,” Jungkook *sulkily* denies.

“Yes, you are.”

“It’s nothing.”

“*Viper*.”

Jungkook grits his teeth. When he speaks, it’s near Taehyung’s ear, his words whispered to make sure no one can hear them. “Someone blatantly flirted with my husband, but said husband doesn’t seem to care.”

“The fuck am I supposed to say?” Taehyung leans back to watch Jungkook.

“I don’t know. *‘Stop’* is a good start.”

“He’s persistent. Ignorance is the best choice like I’ve been doing for years,” Taehyung dismisses, only serving to worsen Jungkook’s mood.

Jungkook crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m already not well regarded by most in the Council, so the whole Haneul business doesn’t help at all.”

"I'm wearing a wedding, one that can be seen by everyone, right?"

"Yes?" Jungkook says, confused.

“Whose wedding ring is it?”

“Uh?”

“You heard me.”

Taehyung and Jungkook’s gazes lock on each other.

“Mine," Jungkook answers.

“So who am I married to?”

“Me.”

“And who’s your husband?”

“You…”

“Exactly.” Taehyung looks outside. “Why are you even jealous? I told you I’m not interested in that kind of thing and neither are you.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m humiliated.” Although there *is* a part of Jungkook, petty and miffed, that wants to slap Haneul a couple times.

A couple dozens of times.

Taehyung snorts. “Sure.”

“I’m not!” Jungkook says but quietens his voice when he carries on. “It’s disrespectful and humiliating. He flirts with you and you don’t even try to stop him. *This* is the sort of thing that makes me look like an arm candy.” He doesn’t mean to sound so upset but he does anyway. “Not fending off unwanted people like Haneul is— Whatever.”

“Again, what do you want me to say? He won’t stop. He never does.”

“Tell him off instead of watching everything unfold.”

“But it’s entertaining to see you scowl and huff,” Taehyung teases.

Jungkook heaves a sigh. “I’m serious, Taehyung.”

A silence settles between them.

Then Jungkook feels an arm curl around his waist, the fingers tucked above his hip and the corset. They pull him closer to Taehyung.

“Haneul doesn’t matter.” Taehyung tilts his head to find Jungkook’s reluctant gaze. “Everyone is used to how he behaves with me. The others won’t view you any less because of how Haneul is.”

“I’m not asking what you think, Taehyung. I’m *telling* you *I* find it humiliating.”

“Alright. I wasn’t— I wasn’t trying to undermine your feelings.”

“I know.” Jungkook relaxes, shuffling closer to Taehyung. “I wasn’t scolding you. I was telling you.”

“Sure sounded like you were scolding me.”

“Maybe I was. A little bit."

“Of course you were, brat,” Taehyung huffs. “Why were you jealous though?”

Jungkook isn’t jealous, per se. Instead, if he were to pick a word, he would say that he’s possessive, but it’s probably misplaced and unwarranted.

Although is it?

Taehyung *is* Jungkook’s husband, and Jungkook is about to say so when he’s interrupted.

“Taehyung, may I speak with you for a moment?” Haneul inquires.

Jungkook’s head slowly turns around. “No. Leave us.”

“I was asking Taehyung,” Haneul says with a scorn that he hides behind a smile. “Taehyung?”

“He said no,” Taehyung repeats.

“You listen to humans now?” Haneul guffaws, incredulous.

“I listen to my husband."

Jungkook would internally cackle if he hadn't been so irritated.

“Fine,” Haneul shrugs. “I would like to court you again. Perhaps you can see reason with me.”

Taehyung scoffs, mocking and disdainful, however before he can reply, Jungkook does.

“Ah, really now?” Jungkook pivots to face Haneul, Taehyung’s arm falling from around his waist. “And what makes you believe that I won’t have you gargling in your blo—”

Taehyung’s hand smacks over Jungkook’s mouth.

Jungkook shoves it away.

“I’m not interested, as I told you hundreds of times, Haneul,” Taehyung says with an uncharacteristic calm, where this time Jungkook is the one whose temper grows more and more volatile.

“A union between Vanae and my land will be good for you and your people,” Haneul contests and for God’s sake.

Jungkook will actually punch him in the face.

“Bite?”

Jungkook has half a mind to let her.

“The opposite, actually," Taehyung says.

“Are you certain?" Haneul says with a suggestive smile. “I could offer you a lot more than what this human does.”

“And what will you be able to offer aside from your corpse to vultures?" Jungkook's words are laced with a warning he most likely shouldn’t be uttering. He’s trying to make a good impression today. However Haneul *pisses him off.*

“Aren't you a curious human,” Haneul hums and his eyes shift to those of his dragon counterpart, turning a deep green. “I would watch the way you speak to me.”

“I’ve seen people like you so often in my life, hopeless for attention, left desperate enough to make advances to married men. They're often referred to as sluts behind closed doors,” Jungkook rasps with a venom so potent that Haneul’s smile wavers as he steps back while Jungkook moves forward. “Because this is all that you are, aren't you, Haneul? A filthy rag begging and crying for men who wouldn't even bother toying with you. You’re only good for scrapes but even then...” Jungkook chuckles, mean and chewed. “Men still don’t want you, don’t they? It must be the only reason why you’re so desperate to bend over for my husband.”

No one intervenes, to Jungkook's astonishment.

Haneul stumbles backward against the table. “He does not love you,” he bites back with a derisive curl to his lips.

“Because you believe he could love *you?"*

Haneul pushes Jungkook away. “The prince of Amaris can bark back, color me surp—”

“Do not believe for one second that your status as a dragonborn makes it impossible for you to be hurt by anyone." *By me*, Jungkook does not speak out loud. "I won’t say it a second time, Haneul. Back. *Off.”*

Haneul’s gaze darts between Jungkook and Taehyung.

Anger boils through Jungkook's veins. The hand that cups his nape aids in abating it.

He’s feeling petty, however, and so he turns to face Taehyung and sprawls his hands on his chest. “Kiss,” he says, a demand that meets its due when Taehyung wordlessly complies.

Taehyung dives in, his lips closing around Jungkook’s bottom one.

They haven’t kissed again since the wedding.

While right now it is only to entertain their pretense — and also piss Haneul off —, Jungkook can't help but slowly move his mouth against Taehyung's that is predictably soft due to the lip balm the dragonborn uses because of *'this annoying fucking cold chapping my lips'*.

The exchange is brief, over before Jungkook realizes.

Jungkook does not mean to sigh in the kiss, flushed and a little dazed, but he exhales as his and Taehyung's breaths mingle when they break apart.

Jungkook's anger is mellowed down, both by the way Taehyung has not hesitated to respond to the request, but also by the hand that is curled around Jungkook's nape, the thumb kneading at the skin under the ear. Another thing Jungkook does not intend to achieve yet does anyway is the way he melts in Taehyung's arms.

He tries to anchor himself by dragging his fingertips along a patch of skin at the loose collar of Taehyung's shirt, but it only makes matters worse. It reminds him that he has never been kissed this way before, that he has never been touched the way Taehyung currently is, and this reminder along with the motion of Taehyung's thumb at the back of his ear sends a wave of shiver that mollifies Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn't want to make it weird. It's a political marriage, not one born from love, but the greed blathers in his mind, whining for more.

Jungkook decides to listen this one time.

"One more."

Taehyung obeys. He presses another slow kiss on Jungkook's lips, fleeting and over too soon. "Come on." He guides Jungkook by the nape, walking them toward their spot at the table.

Jungkook's tongue darts over his lower lip when they pass by Haneul in a taunt that provokes a glare in the dragonborn. Jungkook ignores Haneul to plop down on his chair, Taehyung doing the same as he lets go of Jungkook.

Then, in a way that Jungkook nearly purrs out loud in contentment, Taehyung grabs the edge of Jungkook's seat and effortlessly drags it closer to his own, up until their legs touch. Taehyung's hand finds its home on Jungkook's thigh again, but Jungkook isn't really satisfied by how it's hidden by the table, and so he pushes it higher, making sure that Haneul sees it from afar.

Jungkook exhales a pleased sigh.

"Well. If that will be all," Woosung tentatively says and elicits chuckles in the greenhouse, Jihee bursting into a boisterous laugh while Dahee peers at Jungkook with a smile and a pat on his hand. "We can resume."

The meeting carries on for another hour before the leaders and Woosung deem it done at around 1:30 pm.

Haneul hasn't looked once in Taehyung's direction.

The group of leaders is loitering in a room where lunch will be served, conversing with each other for the most part, however a few like Jihee approach Jungkook for some more chit-chats. Soon, plates and cutlery are deposited in the long wooden table settled at the center of the dining room.

"Lunch will be served in half an hour," Woosung declares before blending with the different groups of leaders peppering the area.

Jungkook eclipses himself toward the entrance of the room where a jug of water is resting on a table, an opened window behind it. He sighs, basking in the temporary serenity before he has to mingle once more.

"I have to take a piss," Taehyung announces to Jungkook. "If anything happens, my mother's here and Jihee is as well. You can go to either of them."

"You're so crude."

"Rich coming from the one who called Haneul a slut," Taehyung retorts and Jungkook freezes. "Was deserved, but still. Seems like I'm rubbing off on you."

"Just— Shut up. Leave."

Taehyung's shoulders shake as he makes his way outside of the room.

Jungkook discreetly rakes his gaze down Taehyung's retreating form. The white shirt and tight pants do wonders for Taehyung's figure.

Jungkook sips on his water. He plucks a mini pastry from a tray that he munches on, his stomach grumbling after the five hours they've spent in the meeting room. He turns around, ready to make his way toward one of the group of leaders, however he bumps into someone's chest.

"Doll."

"Move."

Seungwon's mouth twists around a sardonic smile. "This is all your fault."

"Are you certain? I would wager your cowardice caused this," Jungkook says with a flippant motion at Seungwon's eye patch. "Who took it? Was it Dohyun? A *human?* Must be humiliating, hm?"

"I should've killed you, fucking freak."

"What stopped you? Fear? Is it the same thing that is stopping you now?"

"Nothing is."

Jungkook feels a pressure on his left side, and he glances down.

The sharp blade of a dagger breaks through the porcelain that crackles, pieces crumbling on the ground.

Jungkook peers ahead.

Dahee has her back to him, Seungwon angled in a way that hides the motion of his hand.

The blade carves its path through the corset. It soon reaches the shirt, then the skin that it cuts as a drop trickles down his hip.

Well…

Jungkook hasn't quite thought this through, has he?

Not that it would have changed anything. Seungwon seems to have thrown caution and rationality out of his mind.

"Revna bite. Please. Kookie, let Revna bite."

"Yell and I disembowel you. Try to move and the same thing happens," Seungwon warns. "You may be faster than Haneul, but you ain't faster than me, doll."

"Would you like a reward for such an astute observation?"

Pain shoots in Jungkook's side when the dagger begins to plunge into his navel. His hand lifts to wrap around the blade in a tight grip, a fruitless attempt to prevent it from sinking any further. It slashes at his palm and the inner side of his fingers.

"Bite, bite, b—"

"This is all your fault, doll. Lost my eye because of you. Wouldn't have happened if you weren't such a fucking freak."

"You're quite talkative for a pig."

"I can warn everyone of who Amaris' Prince is," Seungwon smiles.

Jungkook's throat clicks when he swallows.

"Can tell everyone how you're more than what you show. Then what? You think your people will still want someone like you as their leader?"

Jungkook says nothing as blood dribbles between his fingers, the handle of the blade pressing against his thumb and index.

"I won't kill you now. Dohyun's curious about you. Or maybe I should. It's not like the vermin will give a fuck, right? Maybe I'll even play with you before—"

Jungkook doesn't really understand what happens at first, his thoughts muddled by the pain.

All he sees is a hand that flies by his eyes to sprawl over the side of Seungwon's face. The rest of the arm is next, then a white sleeve.

Jungkook silently watches as Seungwon is hurled through the length of the dining room in one swift motion, sent to smash against a wall.

Jungkook’s head twists toward the owner of the hand.

It’s Taehyung.

Of course it's him, however bewilderment still washes over Jungkook.

Taehyung’s eyes have their regular round pupil, but their irises have changed, adorning a golden hue. He does not even look at Jungkook as he walks past him, his attention seemingly rooted on Seungwon.

“What has happened?” Someone says and swirls around.

“Father?”

“Taehyung?” Dahee calls. “Son, what—”

Taehyung lifts a hand from his trousers pocket. His arm draws a swiping motion as breaths of lightning and wind leave his mouth. The wind pushes the dragonborn leaders toward the other side of the room, forcing them to shield their faces. The breaths coalesce in a frenzied whirlwind that hauls plates, cutlery, glasses and chairs, sending them to reel through the air or shatter against a wall.

“Taehyung! Enough!”

Someone breathes a sphere of leaves, perhaps to snare Taehyung, however Taehyung relinquishes his lightning to breathe a cone of fire that burns the attempt to ashes.

“Taehyung!”

Jungkook removes the dagger from his side and leans against the table as he presses his hand over his wound. He doesn't need to protect himself from the hurricane Taehyung makes. The debris never fly anywhere near him.

Jungkook's gaze meets Dahee’s. Her eyes dart where he's clutching at his navel and they widen before narrowing in understanding.

The storm pauses, the tableware breaking into pieces when they hit the ground, before they're carried again by a gust of wind that forms some sort of wall between Taehyung and the rest of the leaders.

Jungkook surveys the dragonborns as Taehyung leisurely walks toward Seungwon, and Jungkook notices it then: the fear. Aimed at Taehyung as the leaders are forced in the sinuous space Taehyung has left between the wood wall and the one of wind and lightning.

The lightning snaps in erratic directions, thundering in the room. A sphere of fire is thrown from underneath the rubble that Taehyung easily dispels it with a flick of his hand. He lifts a heavy-looking torn piece of wall off Seungwon.

“Taehyung, please,” Jihee tries. “There is no—”

The rest of the sentence is drowned by the sound the chunk of wall makes when Taehyung tosses it to the side.

Seungwon leaps to his feet, spitting a glob of blood on Taehyung's shirt. He throws a punch at Taehyung who deftly dodges it to ram his own fist in Seungwon's stomach. Seungwon folds in half with a grunt and Taehyung uses this to seize Seungwon's hair and unceremoniously smash his face on the ground.

"Fucking vile pig."

Smash.

"You don't learn, do you?"

Smash.

"Spilled his blood again and Elders know this time yours will be too."

Smash.

Taehyung does it a fifth time before hurling Seungwon who lands on the dining table that breaks.

Seungwon is on his back, leaning against a broken panel of the table. His face is covered in blood.

Jungkook wonders if Seungwon will die from his wounds.

Taehyung walks toward Seungwon and grabs some knives on his way. Speckles of Seungwon's blood are splattered across Taehyung's face, more adorning his white top.

It's pretty.

Taehyung's chaos is *beautiful,* and Jungkook is only witnessing a sliver of it.

One of the knives lodges in Seungwon's legs. A second does in an arm. A third knife is held between Taehyung's index and middle finger that he flicks forward, the blade sinking into the left side of Seungwon's navel, a mirror to where Jungkook had been stabbed.

"Taehyung! Let him be! You have done enough!"

Taehyung's fingers coil around Seungwon's throat as he reaches him. When Seungwon wrestles in the grip, Taehyung smashes his head on the ground, narrowly missing a sharp piece of wood.

"Your behavior will be—" The man pauses when Taehyung's head tips toward him. The man steps back, not speaking another word.

"Will be what?" Taehyung presses as he lifts Seungwon by the throat with a hand. His timber is more of a velvety drawl, unfurled with cruelty and something mad, a smile slithering its way across his lips.

A shudder runs down Jungkook's spine.

"Corrected? *Punished?* Oh, whatever shall I do," Taehyung says through a low chuckle.

Goosebumps pebble Jungkook's skin, the pain entirely forgotten. His lips part around a shaky sigh as he delights in the sheer animosity that rolls off Taehyung's form.

Everything slows down for a moment.

Something unwinds within Jungkook.

It's a turmoil: of happiness because Taehyung is defending Jungkook; of relief because Jungkook is not alone anymore. Then, it coalesces with a third aspect that snatches the air from his lungs: pride, because his husband is hurting the man that has wounded Jungkook first.

Taehyung has drawn blood *for Jungkook*, and it is perhaps demented how elated Jungkook is at the thought, how he yearns to watch the unbridled carnage Taehyung can rake in his path.

A staccato rumbles in the room, drawing Jungkook's attention

Taehyung's free hand lifts, the other one keeping Seungwon in the air. Flames lick out of his parted mouth, crawling toward his left wrist and wrapping around his fingers. The lightning in the wall diminishes, barely alive.

The other two dozens of dragonborn leaders all remain immobile, some cowering.

Revna hisses in his mind, her vindictive satisfaction blending with Jungkook's.

"I should have killed you at the manor," Taehyung rasps but Seungwon does not answer, unconscious.

"Enough," Byunghun says.

Woosung is strangely quiet as he observes the scene.

"I warned him before. Blood for blo—"

"Kim Taehyung. Do not challenge him."

"Why not?"

"*Enough*."

"Quite the opposite. I don't think this is enough." Taehyung's inflamed hand moves near Seungwon's face.

"Seungwon's actions were a misjudgment," Byunghun says.

"I don't think stabbing my husband can be described as a misjudgment."

"Seungwon must have been… mistaken, about something."

"Mistaken?" Taehyung echoes. His grip tightens, Seungwon coughing.

Byunghun whistles. Something invisible distorts the air in front of him. It creates a hole in the wall of wind and lightning that he steps through before pausing. "Let him go, Kim Taehyung. Now."

Taehyung stares at Byunghun. The fire is snuffed from his hand. "Sure." He lowers Seungwon to the ground.

Jungkook knows that he shouldn't be disappointed, that Taehyung has defied the Council more than enough already, and that he should not worsen the possible sanction that may be given to him. Yet he had not expected for Taehyung to cave in so easily and quickly, for Taehyung to—

Jungkook's train of thought halts when he watches Taehyung turn Seungwon around, the latter on his knees now, his back to Taehyung. Taehyung stares down at Seungwon, his gaze lidded with a rancor that translates in the way he loops his arms around Seungwon's. He rests a foot on Seungwon's left shoulder blade.

Taehyung yanks.

Seungwon shouts as a bone in his shoulder breaks.

Jungkook gnaws on his bottom lip to abate his smile but he does not believe that anything can conceal the mirth that must bleed from each and every one of his cells.

Snap.

Another bone breaks.

"Taehyung!"

"Son, let us—"

Taehyung hasn't released his hold around Seungwon once since he has been ordered by Byunghun to do so, and he still does not as he grips Seungwon by the back of shirt, dragging him across the floor.

Taehyung extends an arm as he trudges forward, unhurried. He executes the same motion he had done when he had fought with Yoongi, his thumb and middle finger forming a ring. A bead of fire and force forms between the two fingers. The wind and lightning wall vanishes when he flicks the bead.

The wall implodes into splinters and chunks that burn before they can fly anywhere.

Exclamations erupt in the room when Taehyung throws Seungwon through the hole.

Taehyung slides his hands into his trousers' pockets. He hums as he peers down, the outside breeze rustling his hair and shirt. "Eight… Seven… Six…"

Hurried footsteps resound in the area as Woobin races through the room.

"Five… Four…"

Woobin runs past Taehyung while the latter continues to count.

Woobin leaps through the hole.

"Three… Two… Ah." Taehyung sighs. "I supposed I was mistaken too. Pigs can fly after all."

Byunghun rushes toward Taehyung, his long coat snapping behind him. He comes face to face with Taehyung right as the latter turns around. "You—"

"I let him go," Taehyung smiles.

“You are *not* ready to become Vanae’s successor. You are not worthy to be a leader with the impulsiveness you have shown today regardless of your draconic heritage.”

“You betrayed dragonborns for your own gain and were allowed back to the Council out of pity,” Taehyung retorts, his posture relaxed. “You're in no place to be speaking about leadership.”

“You and I both know it was not betrayal. It was survival. Your behavior, however, was born from unjustified cruelty.”

"Right… Unjustified cruelty…" Taehyung's head cants to the side. "Seungwon is still in one piece though, isn't he? He still has his arms. His head too. Although the same can't be said about his pride."

"Is this what this is about? A childish pride?"

"No. It's about Jungkook being hurt." Taehyung stalks closer to Byunghun who glares at him yet takes a step back. "It's about my husband being *bled* before my eyes."

Byunghun glances at Jungkook. “He will be fine, however Seu—”

“Will be too, unfortunately.” Taehyung begins to walk off, however Byunghun's hand seizes his arm.

"We are not done. The disruption and destruction you have caused—”

"Byunghun, did you know a God is only as strong as their worshippers? That a God drains their power from their devotees' scrutiny. From their surrender. Their *fear.* A fascinating human tale."

"You are no God," Byunghun spits.

"Yeah?" Taehyung watches the leaders cowering away from him, abandoning any thought of intervention, their attention riveted on his every move. "Perhaps you should remind yourself of that."

Byunghun snatches his wrist from Taehyung's grip. He's shaking, whether out of anger or fright. Perhaps both. “You are nothing but a child. Learn your place.”

Taehyung hums a chuckle, the curl of his lips spiteful. He does not reply, instead crossing the distance between himself and Jungkook.

Jungkook reaches out for Taehyung who welcomes him.

Jungkook places both hands on Taehyung’s chest as he relishes in his husband’s appearance: in Seungwon’s blood that has seeped through the shirt, but also Jungkook’s now as the imprint of the laceration in his palm and fingers tint the white collar, then the curve of Taehyung's throat.

Taehyung deftly unfastens the porcelain corset, leaving it on the table. He bunches the hem of Jungkook’s shirt with a hand, the other smoothing a path on the waist. His thumb gently probes at the skin near the stab wound, the motion trembling and tentative. The color in Taehyung’s eyes that had begun to darken to their original brown lightens anew.

"I'm fine."

Taehyung regards Jungkook with something akin to worry and care. Jungkook likes to imagine that there is a bit of devotion in it too, even if it's nothing but a reverie dreamed by a wishful thinker.

Taehyung leads Jungkook toward the other side of the room where the dragonborn leaders are warily watching him.

“Taehyung, may I?” Nara asks once Jungkook and Taehyung pause near her.

Taehyung peers at her for a second, seeming contemplative. He eventually nods, moving just enough for the woman to approach, but still remaining close to Jungkook.

Nara heaves out a pink gust of wind that reminds Jungkook of cherry blossoms. When the breath takes the shape and density of said flower’s petals, Jungkook smiles. Dahee and Jihee join them as well while Jungkook’s injuries are being treated, the petals covering his hand and the stab wound that is starting to heal before the pain has the chance to flare once more.

“This child should not be allowed to sit at this table,” Byunghun snips, conversing with Woosung.

“This child is my *son*, and future leader of Vanae and Amaris,” Dahee retorts. “He is more worthy at this table than a filthy traitor like you.”

Woosung lifts a hand, leveling Byunghun with a stony stare. He disregards the man in favor of joining the group that has slowly formed around Jungkook and Taehyung. “Jungkook, my apologies for my inattention. Your wounds will be cured promptly. Nara is one of our best healers.”

“Seungwon has to be removed from the Council," Taehyung says without even looking at Woosung.

“As you have said for many years.”

“What will it take for it to happen? His death?”

"Taehyung," Byunghun warns, "you do realize you could be sent to Bastille for what you've done, correct?"

"Yes. And who will be taking me there? You?" Taehyung callously laughs. "Or perhaps you," he continues with a look at Woosung.

"No one will be sent to Bastille. Enough with this," Woosung intervenes. “As for Seungwon, he's easier to handle while seated at the Council, Taehyung."

“Bullshit.”

“Taehyung,” Dahee snaps.

Taehyung’s nose twitches, arms crossed over his chest as he scrutinizes the healer’s motions. “His side too. The blade went in.”

“I saw, dear. It is almost done,” Nara assures. “He will be fine, and no scars will be left.”

“Seungwon will need your aid as well,” Byunghun says.

Taehyung looks at the ceiling and exhales a deep, drawn out sigh. "The Elders themselves wouldn't be able to save you if you as much as heal a scratch on Seungwon while I'm here." His head tilts toward Byunghun. "Don't push your luck."

The itch thrums in Jungkook, kept alive by the everlasting ire that bleeds through Taehyung's voice.

"What the boy has said." Nara's glare settles on Byunghun. "You should consider yourself lucky that Taehyung has not challenged you for intervening, Byunghun. He had every right to. He was protecting his husband, and dragonborns know better than to stop such fights."

"I am certain that Woobin has taken his father somewhere else by now," Woosung says. "I believe it is a fair trade as of now: a gash for broken shoulders."

"Calling it a fair trade is a fucking–" Taehyung's lips press into a thin line when Woosung gives him a pointed look. "Sorry."

"It is done." Nara lowers Jungkook's tainted shirt over his hip.

Jungkook opens his left hand, the cuts on the palm and fingers gone, akin to the one in his navel. "Thank you."

"The meeting is over, and I'm afraid to announce that our lunch will be adjourned for another time. If you need anything, you know where to find me," Woosung says to the leaders in the room. "You should take your husband outside. He must be in need of fresh air," he adds, surveying Taehyung.

"We will send a payment for the reparations."

"Fuck that," Taehyung harshly denies. "This wouldn't have happened if they hadn't let Seungwon step anywhere near Jungkook."

"Kim. Taehyung." Dahee hisses.

Taehyung averts his gaze with a click of his tongue.

"Well," Jihee starts, munching on a snack, "it was highly entertaining."

"Don't," Taehyung says without an ounce of humor.

"Relax, kid."

"I'm fucking relaxed."

"You sure?" Jihee locks an arm around Taehyung's neck and rubs his knuckles on Taehyung's crown.

Taehyung wrestles out of the grip and pushes Jihee away. "Stop it."

"It's good to see you like this, energized and devoted. You're in good hands," Jihee adds as he peers at Jungkook. "Was nice to meet you, Prince, but I must take my leave. I'm sure my wife is eager to know what happened to the wall. Come visit us soon!"

"We will," Dahee chuckles and waves at the departing man.

“Aye, apologies, didn’t see you there,” Jihee says once at the opened entrance doors. He steps to the side to let a guard enter the dining room.

“Woosung,” a man says and bows. “The guest has arrived. He says it is of the utmost importance.”

“Let him in.”

Footsteps echo in the corridor.

Jungkook ignores them to say “Should we leave?”

Taehyung nods. “Yeah, let’s."

A man steps inside, framed by two guards.

Taehyung freezes next to Jungkook.

Dohyun is standing in the room.

Fear is the first thing that Jungkook experiences but it’s fleeting, devoured by wrath.

He’s mad, in every meaning of the word.

Jungkook’s body moves before he can refrain himself from doing so, or before his brain even comprehends that his feet have shuffled on the ground.

He wrenches his wrist away from Taehyung’s loose grasp.

Jungkook runs toward Dohyun but the table is in the way, and so he places both hands on it to leap on the surface. His shoes quietly thud against the wood. Blood roars in his ears, mingling with those of Taehyung’s breaking wings, rattling chains and cruel chuckles.

Jungkook’s brain shuts down.

His motions are driven by one single thought: kill.

He dodges a hand that shoots to grab him. It disturbs his balance, however, but he catches himself on a handstand that finishes in a forward roll.

Cling.

Jungkook grabs a knife before he lands on his feet then he resumes his run across the table. He reaches for his dagger that he retrieves from its sheath and he throws the knife and dagger in two rapid successions that blend together in one.

Dohyun dodges the former. As expected. And so he does not see the dagger that sinks into his shoulder. *As expected.*

Jungkook is eerily calm now, each of his movements calculated: step a foot here to propel himself faster, deftly snatch a second knife without breaking his run, duck to avoid the sphere of vines about to trap him, land on the ground once he reaches the end of the table.

The two guards stand in front of Dohyun, their stance protective.

Jungkook is quick, his muscles straining from the adrenaline pumping in his veins. He's too rapid even for the dragonborns who react too late when he punches one in the throat. Jungkook lowers on his hands and he swipes his leg under the guards who crash to the ground. He springs to his feet a split second later to lunge at Dohyun whose eyes widen.

Jungkook twirls the knife in his fingers to readjust his hold, the handle held tight in his fist. He grips the collar of Dohyun's shirt and the two of them topple down, Jungkook on top of Dohyun. His vision narrows and blurs, tainted in carmine by the fantasy that flashes in his mind of Dohyun gargling and drowning in a pool of his own blood.

Jungkook withdraws his arm and he'll plunge the blade in Dohyun's eye first. Then in the second. Then in the throat because Jungkook needs and *craves* to kill and bleed the man and then it'll be in the chest and in the stomach and in the chest again and again and—

Two strong hands lift and yank Jungkook away from Dohyun.

Jungkook does not struggle in the grip. It's pointless against a dragonborn. So he turns his head to peer at the woman. "Let me go or my dagger finds its home in your eye."

"What is wrong with him?" Someone says.

Dahee pauses next to Jungkook. She rests a hand on his shoulder before continuing her path, standing in front of him now. "Dohyun, isn't it? I believe we have not met before," Dahee says, her voice steeled with contained wrath. "My name is Kim Dahee, Taehyung's mother."

Dohyun is helped to his feet by the guards. Woosung's daughter sits behind him with a growl. A warning.

"A pleasure to meet you," Dohyun says.

Dahee smiles and clasps her hands behind her back. Jungkook can see the way the one tightened into a fist shakes, blood dripping between the fingers. "I am not certain of the reason for your presence here, however if you as much as glance or speak to my son, I will sever your head from your body, even if it will send me to Bastille. Do I make myself clear, Dohyun?"

"Crystal," Dohyun responds through a strained smile, gripping at his bleeding shoulder.

"My dear, protect this human until further notice. You are free to wound anyone who may try to attack him. We have had enough violence for today. I do not know your history between you and this man," Woosung begins, surveying Jungkook and Dahee, "however I demand of you to temper your impulsiveness." His gaze drifts on Dohyun. "Present yourself and promptly speak the reason for your visit. I was told it is urgent."

"My name is Dohyun, and I have found through trusted sources knowledge of the existence of an object that could endanger dragonborns. I have worked with your kind for decades, so I am quite concerned."

"Speak."

"There is a fatal artifact called the primordial stone. It has the ability to kill dragonborns."

The remainder of the day elapses in a daze.

The fury is still present. The shock as well, because the reality of the primordial stone has not only been confirmed, but also spread to every member of the Council.

The dining room had imploded in an uproar, the panic instantly settling in. Woosung had appeased it somehow, then he had warned everyone to not speak a word about this matter to anyone else, that his daughter would know, and that sanctions would be given if someone were to break the vow of silence. Woosung had also said that he would contact the Elders and had then left with Dohyun that he had placed under protective custody after a vote.

Taehyung appears to be in a similar daze, he and Jungkook inside a carriage as they're flown back home by Dahee.

Jungkook reaches a hand toward him. He intertwines their fingers together and squeezes once. Taehyung's hold is limp and quivering at first, however he squeezes back seconds later.

Dahee leaves them at their house when they arrive in Vanae.

Taehyung wordlessly climbs up the stairs to shut himself in his bedroom.

Jungkook slumps on the couch and closes his eyes.

Jungkook doesn't know for how long he stays there, but something nudges his feet some time later. He's a little drowsy, having seemingly dozed off, and he peers up at Taehyung who has changed and cleaned himself.

"I'm gonna fly. You can join if you want."

"I'd like that."

Taehyung flies them at the top of a hill overhanging a part of the forest. They settle on the edge, Taehyung's feet dangling in the air while Jungkook sits crossed legs. Jungkook is a bit dizzy from the height, but he can handle it. Taehyung is here anyway.

The sight is beautiful, but it's rendered bitter by all that has happened today.

"Is it one of your favorite spots?" Jungkook wonders.

"No."

"Good. I wouldn't have been able to enjoy it to its fullest right now."

"Figured."

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m just numb, I guess,” Taehyung shrugs. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know about alright. I’m furious. I should have been faster so they couldn’t have stopped me in time.”

“I should have been the one to move first.” Taehyung's hands clench and relax every few seconds.

“You did with Seungwon. Thank you for defending me.”

“Don’t thank me for this,” Taehyung dismisses with a wave.

Jungkook smiles. “Okay.”

“Is it your forged compliance talking?”

“It isn’t forged when it’s with you,” Jungkook responds with a tilt of his head. Taehyung averts his gaze with a huff. “What should we do about Dohyun?”

“He fucked us over,” Taehyung snarls. “He's now untouchable because of the protective custody he was put under, and while my family and I are strong, fighting against Woosung, the other leaders *and* the Elders that may protect the man with the scent considering the information he can give them would bring too many complications.”

Jungkook sighs.

“He walked straight into the dragon’s lair equipped with a sedative dart. Fucking piece of shit.” Taehyung plays with the lightning that dances across his fingers. “Woosung would have known through his daughter if the man with the scent had lied, so what he said about the primordial stone is true, or what he believes to be true.”

“So the stone exists to kill dragonborns, and Seohyung and Sungmin are looking for it.” Jungkook laughs but it’s mirthless. “I knew they were horrible but— We’ll need to start properly investigating the plague and the stone now.”

“We will. I’m sure my mother has told the others by now.”

“We’re not supposed to speak about this, as Woosung warned us.”

“Who gives a shit. Woosung will visit the Elders if it isn’t already done anyway, chances are they’ll tell him everything about the plague.”

“Can Woosung be trusted?” The man had seemed welcoming and honest.

“As far as I know, yes. Jihee too. But it's the Council, so who knows.”

Jungkook nods, plucking at some strands of grass. His thoughts trace back to the meeting and the one-sided fight that had erupted between Taehyung and Seungwon, but also to the fear that had washed over the leaders’ faces. “How come no one aside from Byunghun actually intervened?”

“They knew they couldn’t,” Taehyung simply says, reclining on his hands.

Jungkook leans closer to Taehyung and emits a soft sound. ""You know…"

"Hm?"

"When you started attacking Seungwon…" Jungkook touches his own lips, his view glazing over with the bloody sight Taehyung had made then. "Their fear was so potent I could taste it on my tongue. It was wonderful."

Taehyung remains silent for a moment. He's staring at Jungkook, unreadable, but an ever so subtle flash of gold colors his eyes, gone after a blink. "You're insane."

"Perhaps," Jungkook chuckles.

Taehyung plops on his back, watching the night sky. Jungkook mirrors him, laying down next to him.

“Thank you," Taehyung says.

“For what?”

“The man with the scent.”

“You’re welcome, even if it didn’t work out as I wanted to, and even if I may have made matters worse. Although it was partially selfish because I wanted to see him dead.”

“You’re pretty scary, Viper. Nearly made me swear to your God,” Taehyung comments. Jungkook has the audacity to laugh. “You were so quiet. Didn’t speak a word whatsoever. Just charged straight at him.”

“I did tell you that I bite without rattling my tail.”

“Clearly. Although you did rattle it with Haneul."

Annoyance immediately flares up at the mention of that name. “I couldn’t stab him no matter how much I wanted to.” Jungkook's fingers *had* itched to withdraw his dagger. “We’ll handle Dohyun though.”

“Seohyung and Seungwon too.”

“I think you took care of Seungwon fairly well earlier,” Jungkook snickers. “It was very satisfying to watch.”

“Imagine how it felt doing it.” Taehyung glances down at Jungkook. “Your hand and side are fine?”

“Mhm, Nara fully healed me.” Jungkook tucks his hands under his head. “Why did you hurt Seungwon?”

Taehyung stares at him with a mix of incredulousness and offense. “Because he fucking *stabbed you?”*

“That was the only reason why?”

Taehyung lifts and drops his hands. “Why else? I may have seemed maniacal but I don’t randomly bash people’s heads on the ground for the pleasure of it.”

“So you hurt him because he hurt me.”

“Well deduced, detective.”

Jungkook giggles, hiding his smile in the crook of his elbow. “Isn’t it messed up how much I love it?”

“I think anyone would be happy to be protected,” Taehyung dismisses, as blunt as he can be.

“Yes, but what I mean is that I enjoyed the violence in how you defended me, and *that* is messed up.”

“Eh. I certainly liked when you stabbed the man with the scent. I also expected you to draw your dagger with Haneul. I’m surprised you didn’t. I still can’t believe you called him a slut,” Taehyung snorts.

Jungkook covers his face with his hands, mumbling in his palms when he speaks. “Oh my God. I did. Seungwon possessed me for a second there."

Taehyung barks out a laugh.

“How come no one stepped in though?”

“Because these kinds of matters are…” Taehyung trails off for a moment, his fingers drumming on his chest. “I told you mates are important, and while we aren’t mates, we’re married, and dragonborns rarely intervene during fights like the ones that happened with Haneul and Seungwon. It’s disrespectful to do so and can be seen as a challenge. If you had full on brawled with Haneul, only I would have been allowed to stop it.”

“Oh... That makes sense.”

Taehyung turns his head to look at Jungkook. “You said you were worried about how the members of the Council view you, but I can assure you that after your argument with Haneul, a lot more leaders hold you in higher regards now.”

“Why?”

“Because you defended our marriage, but most importantly yourself and your honor. This is why I didn’t meddle in until I realized that you may actually do something as demented as slitting Haneul’s throat,” Taehyung says and Jungkook chuckles. “The leaders saw your strength. You showed loyalty, fierce and unyielding. Dragonborns swear by this.”

“Do you love it too?”

“Of course.”

“So you liked the idea of me being loyal to you?”

Taehyung’s face twists around a moue. “You’re making it sound weird.”

“I’m not. I’m asking, prick.”

“Loyalty is good, it’ll always be.”

“I suppose so. Do you consider yourself loyal to me?”

“Loyalty requires trust.”

“And you don’t trust me enough yet to be loyal,” Jungkook summarizes and he shuffles to lay on his belly, his forearm arm pressed flush against Taehyung’s shoulder. “But do you trust me to answer a question with honesty?”

“What question?”

“Am I smarter than Haneul?”

A silence floats for a moment.

“Seriously.”

“Just answer.”

“Are you—”

“Answer!”

“By the Elders, you’re jea—”

“Answer. Me.”

“Yes you are, by a long shot,” Taehyung answers with an eye roll.

“Am I prettier than him?”

Taehyung downright *cackles*. “ *‘Oh no, I’m not jealous at all, Taehyung. What are you talking about?'* ”

Heat climbs up Jungkook’s neck. “Shut up! I’m not jealous and answer me.”

“You’re so fucking petty.”

“Yes. Now tell me. Am I prettier than Haneul?”

Taehyung sighs, arms crossed under his head. “Yes.”

“How much?”

“ *Really* …?”

“Yes. I want to know,” Jungkook says with a jut of his chin. “I’m waiting.”

Taehyung pinches his index and thumb together until there’s barely a hair’s breadth between them. “About this much.”

Jungkook sees red.

He punches Taehyung's arm. "I'm divorcing you," Jungkook announces and turns on his side to face away from Taehyung.

"Alas."

"You're a prick."

"Of course, petty brat."

"I wouldn't be petty if you hadn't let Haneul flirt with you so shamelessly. I should've stabbed him. I'd feel better if I had."

"It's never too late to do so."

"Don't tempt me."

They both fall quiet for a moment, long enough for Jungkook to curiously peek over his shoulder.

Taehyung's lips are curved, small but present nonetheless.

Jungkook is learning that Taehyung has all sorts of different smiles: playful, wolfish, tired, and now… Now, Jungkook wouldn't know how to describe Taehyung's smile, but there is something intimate about it that scratches at a place near Jungkook's hear.

"I saw that smile," Jungkook jests.

Taehyung's features knit into a scowl. "What smile?"

"A genuine smile. Not a callous one or a sarcastic one or a mean one. You smiled. Truly."

"And it's the last time it'll happen if it gets this reaction."

"No, no." Jungkook scrambles on his knees to hunch over Taehyung. "Smile again," he commands, and when it does not happen, he cups Taehyung's cheeks. "Smile."

"No."

Jungkook pinches Taehyung's cheeks. "Smile, come on."

"Give me a reason to smile."

"You have one right in front of you." Jungkook points at himself.

Taehyung scoffs and looks to the side, however his lips twitch upward.

"I saw it!"

"Fuck off."

"I think this is the third time I'm making you smile."

"Third and last."

“You just smiled again. Kind of. It was brief. I’m not sure anymore,” Jungkook hums and reduces the distance between his face and Taehyung’s. “You need to smile again so that I’m certain.”

“And you need to fuck off.”

“I will when you’ll smile again.”

“No.”

“Smile.”

“No and I’ll throw you off the edge if you don’t move.”

“Smiiile.”

“Viper.”

They continue to bicker for a while, Taehyung eventually shoving Jungkook away when Jungkook begins to poke at Taehyung’s cheeks before pinching and pulling at them.

Taehyung says nothing when Jungkook tentatively rests his head on his shoulder, Jungkook fiddling with the golden band of his wedding ring as he basks in the proximity Taehyung allows.

It happens the very next day.

Jungkook cards a hand through his hair.

His nerves feel exposed and raw, as if about to be torn away by the intangible hand wrapped around his throat.

He’s dressed simply: cotton pants, a shirt, and most importantly another sweater that he has stolen from Taehyung’s wardrobe. The sweater helps.

Jungkook climbs down the stairs leading him to the first floor, then the next flight that guides him in the basement underneath Taehyung's childhood house.

Everyone is here already: Dahee and Junhyun giving Jungkook a reassuring smile, Yoongi and Namjoon doing the same while Jimin, Hoseok and Seokjin peer at him with kind eyes.

Then there’s Taehyung, at the front of the group, hands in his sweatpants’ pockets. His head turns toward Jungkook. “Let’s go,” Taehyung says, and so Jungkook moves.

“Can I hold your hand?” Jungkook is nervous, like he hasn’t been since he had first manifested his necromancy.

Taehyung’s response comes in the form of fingers that intertwine with Jungkook’s, guiding him toward the door where the scent of death seeps through. Jungkook and Taehyung halt in front of it.

Taehyung's hand tightens around Jungkook's. "Ready? If not, it can happen another day or never."

"I'm ready. You'll stay?"

"Yeah, I will."

The door has already been unsealed by Dahee, and so when Jungkook and Taehyung rest their free hands on the wooden door, it pushes open, propelling a gust of wind that ruffles their hair.

Jungkook slowly inhales and exhales through his mouth, unbothered by the stench.

"Come on," Taehyung says with another squeeze of his hand, he and Jungkook making their way toward the graveyard of dragons.

Chapter End Notes

I had a blast writing this chapter y'all PROTECTIVE TAEHYUNG FOR THE WIN 😭 (you'll see more of it hihi 😈) I don't like politics at all even in fantasy universes so you won't see too much of it in SLB, but this council meeting was very fun to write, especially Seungwon being absolutely bashed by Taehyung XDD

On a very special note: Kaiya's existence is brought to you by a lovely reader that has invented this place for SLB!! You'll find visuals for it in the form of a magazine bellow that I HIGHLY suggest to read hehe, thank you so much dear Rach for creating a whole place and its lore for SLB, it has been very inspiring 🥹🤍

I hope you've enjoyed this chapter and now that I am back on my regular updating schedule, I will finally get to continue replying to your comments I'm so excited and happy T_____T Thank you so so much for all them I'm very grateful and smile like a fool every time I get a new one 🥹🤍🤍🤍Feel free to leave some for this chapter hehe 🫶🤍

❧ Twitter

— Characters' visuals —

Haneul
Byunghun
Jihee
Woosung

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH19.

Jungkook's outfit I
Jungkook's outfit II
Taehyung's outfit
The greenhouse I
The greenhouse II
Kaiya (please make sure to check this it's wonderfully made 🤍)

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Magazine about Kaiya made by yooniedumplin
❧ Art of Taekook in the garden made by HidingAway311
❧ Spotify playlist for SLB made by V_racity
❧ A SLB video trailer made by thv_gg_tk

Chapter 20: Curious Rubies

Chapter Summary

Taehyung goes through a turmoil of emotions: curiosity, worry, then anger, and consequences happen. Thankfully, silver linings can always be found in pain.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy this chapter hehe 🤍

Song recommendations:

a) First scene: Chilling Souls - A Relaxing Mix from Souls series

b) Second scene (the flashback): i want to meet the person who listens to these kinds of songs (sad chill music mix) + especially Hurt for me by SYML

c) From "A thunder booms in the sky, loud." until the playlist and/or scene ends: Youtube playlist, Spotify playlist

d) Same rec as b)

e) From "Will you accept it?" to "his back to Jungkook and his eyes closing.": Gibran Alcocer - Solas or SYML - You Knew It Was Me [Full EP]

f) For the last scene from "Jungkook finds Taehyung in the kitchen.": Hurt for me by SYML

Cw:

1) blood
2) violence
3) fight

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flames envelop Taehyung's hand as it rises in the air, illuminating the tunnel he, Jungkook, and the rest of the group behind them are advancing through.

"Smells like shit in here," Hoseok remarks with a sniff that is trailed by the sound of a smack.

"Be respectful of this place, Hoseok. Our peers who have died from the plague are residing here," Dahee chastises.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“How far is the graveyard?” Jungkook inquiries.

“Not too far,” Taehyung answers.

Jungkook releases his hold of Taehyung’s hand to wrap his own around Taehyung’s arm, tucking himself snug against him. “It’s cold,” Jungkook says with a shiver that Taehyung abates by allowing the warmth of his fire to wrap around the Prince. Jungkook squeezes Taehyung's arm once. “Thank you."

The group soon reaches two large double doors.

Taehyung places both hands on the doors, slowly opening them. A shudder runs through him, his hair prickling at the back of his head. It still feels like yesterday, the details vivid, whether it being the smell of death or the dragon bones scattered across the bottom of the cave.

Taehyung pauses at the doorway, however Jungkook steps forward, seemingly unfazed by what awaits him. So Taehyung follows suit, pulled inside by Jungkook.

Taehyung slings an arm over Jungkook’s chest when they reach the edge of the platform. “It’s a cliff.”

“Oh.” Jungkook wobbly steps back and Taehyung snorts. “Shut up."

Taehyung forsakes a retort to form a ring in front of his mouth. He breathes a large cone of fire that spreads across the high ceiling, lightening up the dangling lanterns, the pit at the center becoming clearer.

A weight sinks in Taehyung’s chest at the morbid sight.

The group approaches.

“Fucking hell,” Hoseok starts, most likely echoing everyone’s thought.

“By the Elders...” Jimin holds onto Taehyung’s hand, his fingers trembling. “This is… This is terrifying.”

“How— How many of them are here?” Seokjin asks. “It seems endless.”

“Over a hundred are in this cave, however many more have died, buried elsewhere, or simply not found," Dahee responds. "The plague has been occurring for years.”

Taehyung tunes the discussion to peer at Jungkook. “Are you seeing anything?”

Jungkook shakes his head. “Nothing yet. I should get down.”

“Someone needs to fly those three,” Taehyung says with a nod toward Jungkook, Yoongi and Namjoon.

Junhyun grins as he summons his wings. “Hop on!” He crouches as he pats his shoulder. Namjoon and Yoongi both awkwardly make their way toward Junhyun and they both settle each on a shoulder, Junhyun’s securing them in his arms before leaping off the edge to fly down.

A yelp erupts on Taehyung's right. He peers at his mother who has swept Jungkook in her arms, holding him bridal style.

"If I may, my prince," Dahee smiles.

"Thank you," Jungkook laughs and he squeaks when Dahee jumps down, her wings carrying them to the bottom of the cave.

Taehyung remains on the platform as he waits for everyone to safely land, Seokjin and Hoseok next. When his turn arrives, Taehyung does not summon his wings, preferring to climb down by deftly leaping and hanging from rocks and fissures in the side of the cliff. He jumps the remnants of the distance, catching himself on his feet and a hand.

Taehyung straightens up.

A silence settles in the cave as the group takes in the view before them.

"I cannot believe we have a graveyard underneath our home," Junhyun sighs, his features pinched into a contrite frown.

"I'm sorry, Darling." Dahee timidly hooks an arm around her mate's. "I could not speak a word about this matter."

"I know, Darling." Junhyun smiles, punctuating it with a kiss on Dahee's forehead. "I understand. I do not blame you."

"This is fucking insane," Yoongi says. "I've never heard or seen anything like this. What are those silver drawings on the bones?"

"We don't know," Dahee says. "All we know is that a plague is killing our people. Its origin and cause are unknown to us."

Upset churns within Taehyung at the reminder.

A hand slides down Taehyung's forearm, fingers soon intertwining with his own.

Jungkook slowly exhales.

The tattoos are present, clashing with the red sweater Jungkook is wearing. He looks around, his head moving from left to right then down. Jungkook speaks, his lips moving, but Taehyung is distracted by the reminiscences of last night.

Taehyung's eyes trace the side of Jungkook's face, on the markings adorning the neck. His gaze stops at the back of Jungkook's ear, the golden hoops reflecting the torches' hues.

His thoughts wander to last night.

Taehyung slides up his underwear then his loose fitting sweatpants. He reaches for his shirt when a knock rattles against the door. Taehyung swings it open.

Jungkook's gaze darts low on Taehyung's naked chest. "Sorry," he says, then meets Taehyung's eyes. "I thought you were done soon."

"I am. Just need to brush my teeth. What is it?" Taehyung adds when he notices the way Jungkook fidgets with his wedding ring and the pendant of Taehyung's scale.

Jungkook is swathed in the gray, ribbed wool sweater he has borrowed from Taehyung — although 'stolen' would perhaps be a more accurate term. Taehyung has an inkling that the only times he'll ever see this sweater again will be while worn by the Prince, similar to the other three hoodies Jungkook has selected from Taehyung's wardrobe because *'I don't have any clothes like that'* and *'Mine aren't as comfortable and warm as yours, so, yes, I'm* borrowing *them'* but also *'I'm not stealing them. I'll give them back to you. Soon.'*

Taehyung is still waiting for that 'soon' to arrive that he can tell will become a 'never'.

"What is it?"

Jungkook casts his gaze low on the ground. He tugs on the sleeves of his — Taehyung's — sweater. Then he cards a hand through his hair that has grown longer, the bangs reaching the ears now while the undercut has faded away, the strands full and slowly beginning to inch down the nape. "Can I sleep in your bed?"

Taehyung makes a noncommittal sound of both surprise and perplexity.

"And, uh." Jungkook trails off for a moment. "Before you agree or refuse, I just want to add that I want to sleep in your bed."

"Uh?"

"I mean that it's not prompted by a nightmare, or me being unable to sleep, or by the aftermath of the manor," Jungkook explains. "I just— I like sleeping in the same bed as you because it's warm and comfy and I do sleep really, *really* well when I'm with you, I don't know why, it might be 'cause I feel safe but either way it's nice and you're really good to sleep with. I mean literal sleeping! Not… Not the— You know. I don't mean the uh, the other kind of sleeping. Just… Regular, simple, sleeping with you and— Yes. Anyway. I'll shut up now."

One single blink tears through Taehyung's stupor.

So Jungkook wants to sleep in Taehyung's bed because he *wants* to sleep in the *same bed* as Taehyung, an entirely different thought process that Taehyung's exhausted brain doesn't want to bother unraveling now, if ever.

"It's whatever," Taehyung settles on saying. At least the Prince doesn't hog all the blankets like Jimin does, so Taehyung doesn't mind sleeping with Jungkook.

Sleeping in the same bed as Jungkook, Taehyung mentally corrects.

“So that’s a yes?”

“Sure.”

The coyness Jungkook had been exuding vanishes, replaced by a beam that could bounce off the wall. “Thank youuu,” he sing-songs then swivels around, the pit-a-pat of his slipper echoing in the corridor as he skips his way toward Taehyung’s bedroom while humming.

Taehyung blinks again.

“Yeah. Okay.”

After brushing his teeth, Taehyung puts on his shirt then he drinks a gulp of the syrup Minsoo has made for Taehyung’s throat that has been sore for the past few days. Once done, he snuffs out the lantern to trudge toward his bedroom.

Jungkook already tucked under the blankets, sitting against the headboard as he passes a comb through his hair.

“Revna,” Taehyung shouts. “You’re coming up or what?!” He waits and surely enough, a snake slithers her way toward him, her red eyes glinting from the lit candles in the bedroom. Revna lifts her head to peer at Taehyung. She emits a series of hisses. “What does she want?”

“She says she wants to go out and hunt,” Jungkook translates.

Taehyung gently pushes Revna away when she nibbles on his toes.

The two of them make their way to the first floor where Taehyung opens the entrance door, Revna disappearing in the forest's darkness.

He pensively peers at the wooden panel, musing about some changes he will have to work on soon.

It’s only after making sure that the kitchen window is opened for Revna to climb through whenever she will be back that Taehyung reenters his bedroom. He blows out the candles then closes the blinds, the room soon only lightened by the lantern on the nightstand at Jungkook’s side.

Jungkook tuts, slamming something on the bedside table.

“What are you huffing about?”

“Look.”

Taehyung peers at the tattered comb Jungkook brandishes.

“It’s old and the teeth are hurting my scalp. I should buy another.”

“You should,” Taehyung says through a yawn as he makes himself comfortable beneath the blankets. “Jimin said he wanted to spend some time with you, so you can ask him to take you to the market.”

“I love Jimin, he’s so funny and sweet.” Jungkook snuffs his lantern, the bedroom pitch black now.

“He’s a deranged idiot.”

Jungkook smacks Taehyung. “Speak better of him.” He shuffles under the bed sheet for a moment before stilling. “You’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Taehyung's mind trails back to the man with the scent and his unexpected presence at the council meeting. “If we’re with him again at some point, and if we can, we have to kill him.”

“I know. We will.”

“He’s... He knows too much. Seungwon too. About you, your arcane. About the stone and perhaps the plague as well if he figured out what the pit of bones is.”

“Him knowing about the stone or the plague is more dangerous than him being aware that I’m a necromancer.”

“It’s both equally terrible,” Taehyung counters. “He’s untouchable right now. Considering the crucial information he gave them and how he has pledged to 'help dragonborns' in every way he can, the Council will continue protecting him.”

“What if you tell them who he is? That he’s the one who hurt you six years ago?”

Taehyung callously laughs. “If you have the option to kill one person to save a hundred, would you do it?”

Jungkook does not reply.

“Even if I tell them what the man with the scent did to me, the safety of the dragonborn race is understandably more important than my little rough past with the man. And it won’t matter to the Council anyway. I don’t want to tell them."

"But Dahee could have. She could have killed him, or let me kill him."

"You saw Woosung's daughter protecting the man with the scent. There was no way for anyone to kill him the moment she stepped in. Plus the Council wanted to hear what he had to say.”

“I shouldn’t have done anything," Jungkook mutters.

“What’s done is done. I’m sure he had planned everything from beginning to end. He knew my mother wouldn’t be able to do shit because she’d be against two dozens of dragonborn leaders and Woosung's daughter. She is not stupid either. I'm sure you, yourself, also knew that he wouldn't have showed up if he didn't have some kind of safety net if he were to be attacked. It's a fucking mess.”

“There’s a good side to this though.”

“Where?”

“Now that he’s in protective custody, it means that there will be someone with him at all times, meaning that he can’t take you or me away for now.”

An ounce of relief rises in Taehyung. “Yeah, there’s something at least.”

“There’s always some good in bad, some hope in death. Just like there’s beauty in chaos. Sometimes it can simply be difficult to see.”

Taehyung hums in agreement. “You’re ready for tomorrow morning?”

“As ready as I can be. I’m nervous…”

“It’ll be fine. You can always backtrack at any point. You know what word to say.”

“Mhm.” Rustling sheets disturb the quietude when Jungkook shifts under them. “I’m nervous but I was more anxious about the council meeting. To quote you: *‘My skeleton and organs were about to spill out of my ass’* .” Jungkook snickers to himself as Taehyung huffs. “It was so scary. God… I had never felt so scrutinized before.”

Jungkook always presents himself with a certain regal air to him, his voice kind or composed. Yet Jungkook had been so damn petty, spiteful and downright *mean* to Haneul that Taehyung internally cackles at the reminiscences.

“I just hope my… moment with Dohyun didn’t mess up how the Council views me.”

“It didn’t. This also showed loyalty.”

“I hope so.”

Jungkook sounds uncertain. Insecure, even.

“There’s so much that I want, Taehyung.”

“Because I’m greedy…It’s ravenous, Taehyung.”

Jungkook says that he wants a lot, yet what he wishes to have are more often than not things considered mundane, like someone holding his hand when he’s scared, or praising him when he's done well.

“You did good at the meeting,” Taehyung starts and it isn’t too difficult or awkward to say, albeit coy, first because he means it, and second because Jungkook deserves to hear this after the astonishing show of intelligence and political acumen he had displayed.

“I did?” The intonation of Jungkook's voice is a pitch higher than usual. He seems to move closer to Taehyung because something bumps against Taehyung’s arm.

“Of course,” Taehyung says, taken aback by how taken aback *Jungkook* is. “You were in a place where almost every single person occupying it was opposing you. You handled the members of the council, you stood up for yourself. Then the whole Runalis part, you— You impressed everyone there.”

“Everyone?” Jungkook echoes. Taehyung hums. “Including you?”

“Yeah."

Jungkook emits a light laugh. “Thank you.”

“Seohyung and Sungmin would never, like, reward good behavior or things like that?” Taehyung wonders, ready to drop the touchy subject if Jungkook shows any sign of discomfort.

“Never. Let's just say affection was never really part of my life, whether physical or verbal."

“They’re idiots.”

“Yes.” Jungkook’s hands wrap around Taehyung's arm, then tentatively rests his head on Taehyung’s shoulder. “This okay?”

Taehyung thinks about it.

He’s not uncomfortable. He’s growing more and more accustomed to Jungkook’s proximity, a feat that to this day still puzzles Taehyung.

“It’s fine."

“Okay.” Jungkook yawns. “Goodnight.”

Taehyung doesn’t reply. He also doesn’t fall asleep right away, staring at the ceiling.

Taehyung startles awake when an elbow roughly nudges his shoulder. He springs up and summons fire around his hand, heart wildly beating in his chest as his gaze darts around.

There’s no one in the room, aside from Taehyung and a panting prince. Taehyung peers on his right.

Jungkook sits up and grips at the blanket, his eyes wide.

Taehyung makes a motion to touch him, however he remembers what had happened at the cave, and so he retracts his arm to instead lit up the lantern on his bedside table and will away his fire.

“Viper?” Taehyung lowers his head to catch Jungkook’s gaze that is distant, seeming lost in the remnants of his evident nightmare. “You’re fine.”

“Is it the bathroom?”

“It’s not. You’re in Vanae, in my bedroom.”

“‘kay.”

Taehyung surveys Jungkook who’s slowly inhaling and exhaling, the breathing irregular and rapid. Taehyung begins to form a storm globe, the only thing that he knows can potentially aid in this situation. “What do y—”

“Touch me?” Jungkook startles at his own words before freezing on his spot. “Can you— Can you touch me, please?”

Taehyung forsakes the storm globe. He lightly grabs a hold of Jungkook’s arm, but Jungkook jerks out of the grasp and shuffles away from Taehyung to sit on his knees.

“No. Sorry. M’fine. Sorry, I—” Jungkook’s throat clicks when he gulps. “Can handle it on my own.” He doesn’t look at Taehyung while he shakes his head, his eyes cast low, and it’s as though he doesn’t even recognize where he is or who’s in front of him. “Sorry.”

Taehyung’s hand rises. It hovers in the air, unsure on what to do, but it eventually settles on cupping Jungkook’s cheek. Jungkook does not flinch away from the touch. Instead he grows still, not a single sound escaping his mouth.

Taehyung tilts Jungkook’s head up, enough for their gazes to find each other. “It’s just me. You’re fine.”

Jungkook nods, so tense beneath Taehyung’s palm that Taehyung does not believe a storm globe can help this time.

“Sorry,” Jungkook reiterates.

Taehyung lets go of Jungkook to recline on his back. He does not overthink it much when he pulls Jungkook with him. Jungkook is stiff, his muscles straining a bit against Taehyung’s loose grasp. “Lay down,” Taehyung instructs, and Jungkook does so with a sigh that sounds relieved. “Stretch your legs too.” Taehyung extinguishes the small flame in the lantern, the bedroom drowned by darkness anew. Jungkook obeys, extending his legs under the blankets as he lays on his side. “Just get comfortable.”

Jungkook props an arm over Taehyung’s chest and he presses himself close, tucking his face in the dip of Taehyung’s neck.

Taehyung makes no remark about the increased proximity when he notices how the subtle tremors in Jungkook’s limbs are slowly waning. Taehyung’s arm bumps against Jungkook’s when he rests it over his own navel.

“What do you want?”

Jungkook shakes his head, his nose nudging Taehyung’s throat. “M’fine. This is good. I—I’ll move in a minute, okay? Just a minute. And then I’ll move. Maybe— Maybe not a minute. Few seconds’ fine.”

Jungkook's words draw at this thread in Taehyung’s chest, the tug pulled by its recipient.

“How many loaves of bread do you want?”

“Uh?”

“How many loaves do you want?”

Jungkook picks at a loose strand of Taehyung's shirt. “Why are you asking this?”

Taehyung doesn’t really know. “Because I can.”

A silence extends in the bedroom, intersected by some rustling when Jungkook somehow manages to inch even closer to Taehyung, half laid atop of him now. “This is stupid…”

“Maybe, but that does not answer me.”

Jungkook’s fingers pause. “One.”

Taehyung hums. “Only one even if you’re clearly hungry for more? I can hear your stomach rumbling from here. Can feel it too,” he adds, hyper aware of how Jungkook is sagging above him.

“I shouldn’t— One’s more than good.”

“Well…” Taehyung's nervous. He doesn't know where he's going with this, if it'll even help Jungkook. “I do have one loaf of bread, but the problem is that I have two more with me, and I ate, like, thirty of them before because I’m ravenous and stingy like that. So I’m full and can’t eat those last three loaves.”

A soft chuckle tumbles out of Jungkook’s mouth that cascades down Taehyung’s neck.

“My mother always told me wasting food is bad. Just saying.”

“You’re so stupid."

While Taehyung can’t see Jungkook's face, he can hear the audible smile in his voice. “So you’ve said.”

Jungkook slings a leg between Taehyung’s and encircles Taehyung’s waist with an arm, the palm sprawling over the ribs. “I suppose I could eat those three loaves,” he eventually says, sounding more like a question.

“I think that’d be the best plan. You don’t want to see my mother angry.”

Jungkook snorts. “She can be pretty scary, like that time where you and Junhyun were supposed to broom the living room but hadn’t.”

Taehyung winces at the memory. “She’s a *lot* scary.”

Jungkook huffs. Clicks elevate in the room, a hint that he’s fiddling with his wedding ring. “Then…”

“What do you want?”

It takes a while for Jungkook to respond, the calm that floats between hesitant yet… cozy?

Taehyung is *cozy*, which comes as a shock to him. He's with a human after all. With *someone else.* Yet he's comfortable enough to fall asleep at any moment now, lulled by Jungkook’s even respiration and the cocoon the obscurity in the room provides.

“Can you…” Jungkook halts.

Taehyung waits.

“Can you touch me? A little? Not for long, don't worry.”

So.

Regret seeps into Taehyung. He’s lost on how to proceed next with this whole bread exchange. He’s most certainly out of depth, a tad awkward and completely befuddled that he has put himself in this situation to begin with. It had been easier when Jungkook had broken down into tears, where Taehyung's thoughts had narrowed down on helping Jungkook.

However it's quieter here, and Taehyung's mind is louder.

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook mumbles. “Maybe my neck?”

The neck.

The neck is easy. It’s accessible and doesn’t require moving much. Taehyung only has to lift his right arm and he does as much, a bit mechanical in his movements. His hand soon drapes over the back of Jungkook’s neck, fingers curling around the nape. “Like this?”

“Yes, thank you... Is this okay?”

Is it?

“If it’s too much, I—”

“It’s fine."

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Jungkook's body that had tensed up relaxes again. “Okay.”

Taehyung keeps his hand on Jungkook’s nape. He mentally lists arcanic flowers to distract himself from how pressed flush his and Jungkook’s bodies are, and how unfamiliar it is.

Taehyung absentmindedly rubs his thumb up and down the column of Jungkook’s throat. It’s a self soothing motion and it works, the sliver of discomfort that had been flickering soon gone.

Jungkook shudders.

Taehyung doesn’t believe it’s due to any cold since he’s keeping the bed and the room warm.

Perhaps Jungkook is scared?

“Are you scared?” Taehyung asks.

“Hm?”

“Are you?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re shivering,” Taehyung notes. Although Jungkook isn’t anymore. The motions of Taehyung’s thumb resume after a while, skidding along the silky skin.

Jungkook shudders again.

“There’s nothing wrong with admitting you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Then why—”

“It feels good.”

“What does?”

Jungkook grumbles some intelligible words before they finally make sense. “Don’t make me say it.”

“I’m not making you say anything?”

“I said it feels good." The pout is evident in Jungkook's answer.

“Yes, but what does?”

“God, you’re— You’re so *dumb,* I can’t believe this.”

Taehyung frowns and pinches Jungkook’s neck. “Just tell m—”

“Your touch feels good, Taehyung.”

“Oh.”

Taehyung pauses, staring at the dark ceiling. “It’s just me though?” He jolts on his spot when teeth sink into his shoulder. He — lightly — yanks on Jungkook’s hair in retaliation, pulling the biting viper away. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You’re annoying!” Jungkook promptly nestles back against Taehyung. “Why do you have to contest everything I say?”

“I’m not contesting. I’m fucking lost.”

“There’s nothing to be lost about and I’ll bite you again if you argue.” Jungkook squeaks when Taehyung zaps him. “Prick. I’ll bite you.”

“Do it and I’m tossing you out of my bedroom.”

“No, don’t.” Jungkook clings onto Taehyung a little tighter. “I’m telling you your touch feels good, okay? Take it as it is.”

Yeah, Taehyung guesses he can do that.

Although, no one has ever told him this before. Why would anyone appreciate Taehyung's touch? Plus it's only a hand on the nape here, nothing major. So, really, why—

“You’re still questioning it."

“Get out of my head.”

Jungkook chuckles. “Why do you always question these kinds of things?”

“Because I don’t do… this.” Whatever ‘this’ is. Hugging is a word for it but Taehyung doesn’t want to associate it with Jungkook. It’s too foreign.

“This?”

“ *This.* I don’t understand why a hand on the nape would feel nice.”

“It’s not *a* hand. It’s *your* hand.”

“Now you're just making me even more confused."

Jungkook doesn’t bite Taehyung but he does tweak Taehyung's side. “I appreciate you a lot, so I… Uhm. I like when… When you’re— I mean— I like *this* . ‘cause it’s you. There isn’t anything complex about it.”

It all sounds like the most convoluted equation Taehyung has ever been confronted to, and he’s already abysmal at math.

“I see.” Taehyung does not.

“No you don’t.”

Taehyung can’t repress the amused huff that leaves him at how easily Jungkook can read through him. “Yeah, I don’t."

“It’s okay. Just accept it, maybe you’ll understand later,” Jungkook says and Taehyung hums. “We’re so close I could feel the hum,” Jungkook says with a chuckle that *Taehyung* can feel too. “Can you do—”

Taehyung waits but nothing follows. “Do what?”

Jungkook blows a puff of air. “Do you think it’s alright if people are needy?”

“It is, yes.”

“You said you find it annoying, if someone's needy with you.”

“I also said it’d depend on the person,” Taehyung counters, effectively shushing Jungkook for a moment.

“Yes… That’s true.”

Jungkook falls quiet.

Taehyung doesn’t do more, waiting for Jungkook to speak and ask. *Patient*. Eons away from how Taehyung usually is.

“Can you move your thumb again?”

Taehyung complies.

A new shudder runs through Jungkook's form when Taehyung's thumb presses at the back of the ear, the rest of the fingers still cupping Jungkook's nape. Taehyung avoids the ear a second later, choosing instead to drag the pulp of his finger down to the alcove of Jungkook's neck where it stays. When he kneads behind Jungkook's ear again, the response is the same one as before.

Jungkook is so responsive.

He sighs and shivers and seemingly *melts,* growing heavy atop Taehyung.

Taehyung has never seen anything like this before, not even between his parents or anyone Jimin has dated.

It's odd.

Do people have sensitive places like the patch of skin at the back of Jungkook's ear?

Taehyung doesn't have any, and certainly none that mollifies him the way it does with Jungkook. Jungkook had said it's because Taehyung is the one doing it, but would he react the same way if Jimin were to be touching this spot?

Taehyung kneads circular motions at the dip under the lobe and a tremor quivers through Jungkook.

It's really, really odd.

It's as though Taehyung is unearthing a new language, one made of touching skin, finger grazes and trembles.

Taehyung's curiosity grows.

His thumb slides from the ear to the base of the neck. He massages there. No response. He trails underneath the ear once more and this time, when he presses here, Jungkook hums and scoots closer, the latter burying his face against Taehyung.

What if Taehyung uses his nail rather than the pad of his finger?

Would it be different?

Would Jungkook's body sing another song?

Taehyung wonders.

He gently scrapes his nail at the back of Jungkook's ear, and strangely enough, Jungkook does not react like before. So Taehyung moves his thumb lower down Jungkook's throat. It halts at a point between it and the collarbone. Taehyung grazes his nail there.

Jungkook makes a sound. He shudders, the most acute it has been so far, his hand gripping at Taehyung's shirt in return.

"Sorry." Taehyung lets his thumb find its way below Jungkook's lobe, the nail knocking against the golden hoops.

“No, I— No. It’s fine. It surprised me." Jungkook's fingers don’t relent their grasp on Taehyung’s top.

“Good or bad?”

“Really good... Didn’t know it was sensitive there, s’ry,” Jungkook says around a slurred lisp.

So Jungkook himself doesn’t know his own songs.

Taehyung feels strange.

Maybe it's because of how Jungkook is draped above Taehyung like a weighted blanket. Maybe it's due to the shape Jungkook's greed takes when he nuzzles the curve of Taehyung’s throat, his breath warm against Taehyung’s skin. Or perhaps it has everything to do with how Taehyung holds someone like he never has in the past.

Taehyung needs a bit of distance, feeling a tad suffocated at the extended contact and the dazed curiosity it elicits in him.

He slowly pushes Jungkook off of him who turns to lay on his back then draws his legs up, arms slung over his belly. Taehyung has adjusted to the obscurity surrounding them, so when he turns to his side to face Jungkook, he can faintly see the shape of Jungkook’s profile.

“Sorry, I asked for a lot.”

“You didn’t.” Taehyung folds an arm under his head. “Are you hungry like this with other people?”

“Yes, but… Not the same way I am with you?”

“How so?”

“With you I’m hungry for bread, but with others I’m hungry for… For small biscuits.”

Taehyung emits an amused huff. “This metaphor is so fucking stupid, but it also makes so much sense.”

“It does,” Jungkook says through a chuckle.

“How many biscuits do you want?”

“A lot.”

“And how many loaves of bread do you want?”

“A whole lot more..."

“Someone else can give you those loaves though, like Hoseok or Seokjin,” Taehyung says but the words don’t feel right on his tongue.

“I don’t want them from anyone else. I don’t think I’d like them as much," Jungkook confesses, and it reads like a statement loaded with *something* Taehyung can’t comprehend.

“Are you still hungry?”

“I’m always hungry, Taehyung.”

Nothing happens for long enough for Taehyung’s thoughts to drift away from the bedroom, instead wandering to the citadel, to Seohyung and Jungkook’s father, to how deprived Jungkook's life must have been.

Jungkook speaks, pulling Taehyung out of his musing.

It’s so quiet that Taehyung can barely hear Jungkook, but the words are said, the request is asked, and Taehyung listens.

“Can I have another loaf, please?”

“Yes.” It’s fine like this. Taehyung can breathe a little easier.

Jungkook grabs Taehyung’s arm to place the hand over his own throat. “This okay? I… I like it. Feels nice… And safe.”

“Yeah."

Jungkook mustn't be quite happy with where Taehyung’s hand is because he moves the fingers until they properly cradle his nape, resting the thumb on the side of his throat. Taehyung doesn't budge, his hand slackened and allowing Jungkook to do as he pleases for now. Jungkook seems to enjoy himself if the way he hums when he nudges Taehyung’s thumb with his own is any indication, the two settled under his ear. Jungkook does not shudder, however.

It’s not the same.

“It’s not the same,” Jungkook echoes Taehyung’s thought.

“Why?”

“I was curious, if it’d be the same if I did it myself, but it’s not.”

It’s odd.

“It’s odd,” Jungkook says.

With pulp of his thumb, Taehyung walks a gentle path beneath Jungkook's lobe and hoops, kneading at the place. A shiver blossoms from this spot and down Jungkook’s form.

“S’really odd.”

“Yeah… It is.”

“I don’t understand,” Jungkook whispers.

“Me either.”

Jungkook turns on his side, he and Taehyung facing each other. Taehyung’s arm falls behind Jungkook at the movement, curled over Jungkook’s hip. Jungkook shuffles to reduce the distance and pauses right as Taehyung is about to tell him to stop.

“Can I have one more?” Jungkook asks but he’s already hauling Taehyung’s arm higher up his spine.

“You’re greedy,” Taehyung rasps and it’s not an accusation, but rather an inquisitive remark.

Jungkook stills, his hold around Taehyung’s elbow vanishing. “I told you.”

“I know.”

“Is it bad?”

“No. You can be however you want.”

“One more?”

Taehyung nods but Jungkook can’t see him. “I nodded,” he declares and feels stupid for doing so.

Jungkook chuckles.

Taehyung’s fingers soon touch soft skin and velvety locks.

Jungkook’s hair flows amidst the tip of his fingers. He rubs the strand between his thumb and index, enjoying the silky texture. His nails follow suit, grazing up and down, and he can hear the faint scratching sound they make against Jungkook’s hair and scalp.

Taehyung doesn’t get why it’s so calming to do this; to touch someone this way, to feel this kind of soothing quietude at the sounds and sensations.

“Feels really nice,” Jungkook sighs.

Taehyung rakes his nails right at the base of the nape where the hair starts, and this time the shiver is joined by goosebumps.

Taehung can *feel* the way Jungkook’s skin pebbles and thrums alive.

This is new.

“Didn’t know it could feel so good... Can you go a little higher, please?” Jungkook exhales when Taehyung scratches his way up the scalp. “Feels so nice, Tae."

Taehyung hums, relaxed in a way he never has been.

“Have you done this with someone before?” Jungkook asks.

“Aside from someone ruffling my hair to be annoying, no, I haven’t.”

“Do you like it?”

“I like the sounds."

“The scratching sound?” Jungkook inquires and Taehyung makes a noise of confirmation. “Sounds even better when it’s on your head.”

Taehyung plays with his own hair curling at his nape. The scratching doesn't sound as good as the one he does with Jungkook's strands. He combs his fingers through Jungkook's locks before sprawling their pulp on the scalp, his nails resuming their careful scraping, gentle.

Taehyung is gentle with a human.

With Jungkook .

Jungkook mumbles something that Taehyung can't make out.

"What?"

"M'sleepy," Jungkook slurs. "'feeling weird."

Taehyung halts. "Uh?"

"Don't stop," Jungkook huffs, petulant, and so Taehyung resumes his ministrations.

"What were you saying?"

"Dunno."

"You said you're feeling weird," Taehyung presses as he does so under Jungkook's lobe.

"Mhm," Jungkook hums, the sound content and quiet.

"How?"

"M'just heavy."

"Your mind is heavy?"

"My body."

One of Jungkook's hands crawls up the mattress to curl around Taehyung's arm. Jungkook squeezes but it's sluggish and feeble, and the word 'melt' flickers in Taehyung's mind again.

"It feels weird," Jungkook says.

"You're probably tired."

"Hm, I'm tingly too, like." Jungkook pauses to yawn. "I always think, 'have to, but in the bathroom I didn't. It was silent, like right now."

"In the bathroom?"

"After my nightmare, when I came down and said storm."

"Ah... I see."

"It's nice, not to have to think, sometimes. It never happens, but in the bathroom I didn't need to think, 'cause you were taking care of me."

Taehyung does not take care of anyone other than his family.

He will repair or carry something, do whatever he can to solve any problem — *help —,* but he will not take care of people. Taking care of someone is intimate. It's an exchange of trust and affection and so much more that the sole thought of granting this to anyone else disturbs Taehyung.

So what does that make of Jungkook? Of this lull in time they're sharing together tonight?

Taehyung had never expected for Jungkook to sow so many seeds of confusion, curiosity and peace that Taehyung is slowly reaping one by one.

It’s scary.

He doesn’t know what will bloom from this, if it’ll have Taehyung pushing Jungkook away, or if, on the contrary, Taehyung will pull Jungkook closer only for Jungkook to push him away.

Taehyung thinks he’d dislike that.

“Seohyung hated taking care of me,” Jungkook says, tearing Taehyung out of his mind.

“Yeah, and she’s a piece of shit, what’s new.”

Jungkook chuckles and he must have shuffled closer because Taehyung can feel the air ruffle his shirt. “Do you hate it too?”

The answer arrives easily, much more than Taehyung would have thought.

“No.”

“M’kay, that’s good.”

Taehyung's lids lazily flutter.

“Tae?”

“Hm?”

Jungkook’s hand drifts higher up Taehyung’s arm, nestling at the crook of the elbow. He’s silent for a while before saying “I like when you take care of me... Do you like doing it?”

“I don’t know what counts as taking care of you."

“Right now does.”

“I’m not doing anything special.”

“It’s special to me.”

Taehyung tangles his fingers in Jungkook’s hair again, rubbing another strand. It feels nice, it sounds nice. It’s really, *really,* nice.

Jungkook always appreciates every little graze and touch, any fleeting contacts that most would take for granted, where time appears to stop for him whenever he receives a sliver of affection. However Taehyung has never paused, the way he and Jungkook are tonight.

The chaos within Taehyung has rarely known a peace so palpable, and he wonders if it’s the same for Jungkook.

Up til now, it had never really crossed Taehyung’s mind how lonely and barren Jungkook’s life must have been if only Namjoon and Yoongi were allowed to care for him from a distance enforced by Seohyung.

Anger rises at the thought. Taehyung’s fingers ache to tear apart, but it can wait.

He closes his eyes instead.

His senses narrow the strand of Jungkook's hair he strokes, to Jungkook's breath against his collarbones, to the blend of grim and floral scent drowned by a saccharine caramel.

“It’s nice,” Taehyung finally answers, perhaps too late.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“S’good.”

“Sleep, Viper.”

“Mhm, ‘kay.” Jungkook yawns, the sound ending in a pleased noise. “Night, Tae.”

“Goodnight.”

Jungkook falls asleep almost instantly, his breathing slow.

Taehyung retracts his arm then shuffles to lay on his back.

He thinks.

About how he and Jungkook had protected each other at the cost of wounds and fear, yet all soothed by a comfort only they could provide for the other. He thinks about their trip to the cave, how unexpectedly fun it had been. Taehyung’s mind had been completely taken away from the man with scent. It had been serene, to a point where Taehyung had even fallen asleep while his scars were being treated, a once dizzying realization when he had woken to a soft touch on his crown.

Taehyung's mind may not trust Jungkook yet, however his heart and body appear to think otherwise.

Then, Taehyung thinks of earlier today, of how the ever so composed and poised prince had let go for once and allowed his ire to ripple through his very form and words. It had been such a compelling sight to witness.

Taehyung wonders if Jungkook is perhaps the vessel of a chaos too.

Taehyung hopes that is the case.

“You and Jungkook complement each other incredibly well, my son,” Dahee had said one night. *“I hope you will see it one day.”*

Taehyung is beginning to.

How blind would he have to be to not see it? To not realize how Jungkook is growing to be the peace to Taehyung’s storm.

Everything feels so complex yet so easy with Jungkook, so unfamiliar yet so natural.

Taehyung flicks a sphere of fire in the air. It’s small, its light weakly flickering, but it suffices to cast a golden hue on Jungkook.

Jungkook’s hair is fanned over the pillow, his lips slightly parted around little exhalations.

The tug occurs once more.

Taehyung *has* to make sure the Prince is real.

He starts with his gaze that draws the soft edges of Jungkook’s sleeping face; the gold jewelry adorning the ears and the neck. When it isn't enough, Taehyung reaches a hand for Jungkook. His fingertips brush upon Jungkook’s cheek and it takes him by surprise. It makes him *shy.* And so Taehyung withdraws, folding his arms under his pillow.

His hands ball up into fists.

Jungkook isn’t Taehyung’s friend. He’s not part of Taehyung’s family. He’s not Taehyung’s lover either. Jungkook is something else entirely, a new, unlabeled box that has opened in Taehyung’s mind. He could title it as ‘husband’, but reducing what Jungkook is growing to be for Taehyung to something so impersonal as a husband in a political marriage feels wrong.

So Taehyung leaves this box alone, with a blank spot on the lid awaiting its name.

○○ NOW ○○

“What are you daydreaming about?”

Taehyung tenses at Jimin’s voice. “I’m not daydreaming,” he says and notices at the same time the heavy presence of a basilisk around his neck.

“You sure? Because you were staring,” Jimin retorts with a nod ahead of him.

Taehyung peers at Jungkook who's standing at the center of the graveyard, having moved away from Taehyung without him noticing. The rest of the group is lined near the cliff, yards away from the Prince who aimlessly walks around.

"Do you need any help, Jungkook?" Junhyun asks.

Jungkook shakes his head. "I'm trying to see if I can find any lost souls."

"Nothing for now?"

"Nothing, which is strange considering the amount of dead here."

"Is it strange," Dahee muses.

Jungkook's black flames scatter across the graveyard, passing through the skeletons, skulls and into the ground. "I don't think there's a single soul here. There should be, but… The plague attacks the organs, correct?"

"Yes. It begins to erode the breath pouch first, then spreads to the rest of the organs," Dahee answers. "The breath pouch is the last one to die."

"I think the plague may not only destroy the organs, but also the souls."

Taehyung's brows furrow. "How so?"

"There should at least be *one* soul here, yet I can't sense anything at all," Jungkook explains. "It's as though those skeletons never held any soul in them."

"The Elders have never mentioned anything about the souls, right?" Hoseok asks and Dahee confirms it.

"They don't have a necromancer," Jungkook shrugs but his nonchalance falters when his flames start to grow a tad more active, swirling in some places while withdrawing in others.

Taehyung clicks his tongue. "What's going on with your flames?"

"I don't know..." Jungkook glances at Taehyung. "They're looking for something."

Taehyung crosses his arms, his restlessness increasing. "Be careful."

Jungkook smiles and nods. He resumes his haphazard trudging through the graveyard and follows his flames that lead him back to the center of the graveyard. He sits a few minutes later. "I'm a little hazy."

Taehyung is about to step forward but a hand stops him.

"Wait," Dahee says.

"What if he accidentally raises the dead again?" It could wound Jungkook worse than it had after the manor, Taehyung mulls over. "The deceased dragonborns here have all died from an arcanic plague. No one knows what kind of impact it could have on Jungkook." Taehyung's gaze darts toward the bundle of flames that inches near Jungkook. His eyes widen.

There’s a frail blue amidst the raven: the sphere of a soul that Jungkook cradles it in his palms then lifts it to his face. The flames swirl around it and Jungkook must be trying to feed it, like he had done for Kija when Taehyung had wanted to hug the boy, however it’s fruitless.

The soul vanishes moments later, as if snatched away.

“Did it pass?”

“I don't think so.” Jungkook lowers his arms. “It’s— It’s just gone.”

“Gone?” Yoongi echoes.

“Souls can disappear like this?” Jimin asks next.

Jungkook’s head darts behind him, his black eyes wide open. Someone speaks but Taehyung shushes them.

“Taehyung, remember the wailing? After the wedding?”

“You’re hearing it again."

Jungkook emits a quiet *‘Yes’.*

“Like before? Is it hurting you?”

“No, it’s less painful. I wonder if it’s because the soul has passed the worst phase of the plague since the winter’s pulse is nearly over, if it's wounded by the plague? But how would I be able to hear it if it's alive?”

“What are you talking about?” Dahee questions and Taehyung explains about the dragon roar Jungkook had heard during their wedding night. She lifts a hand to her chin, an arm folded over his chest. “Do you believe the roar you are hearing is related to the plague?”

“I don’t know. It may be,” Jungkook replies. “What I’m certain of is that I can hear a dragon soul whining in pain from far away. Really, really far away.”

“Jungkook could be hearing a dying dragonborn,” Namjoon ponders.

Taehyung throws a snide look at the page. “And how would that be possible?”

“A soul is a soul. Alive and dead people have one, so Jungkook may be able to manipulate and hear them whether the person is alive or not. Hypothetically,” Namjoon says.

Taehyung will hypothetically burn this idiot’s ass.

“He’s a damn necromancer.” *You fucking buffoon*. “He deals with the dead, not the alive." Taehyung's growing progressively more irritated for some reasons. His fingers drum on his arms before they stop and tighten. “We should leave.”

“Jungkook could perhaps stay for a little longer,” Seokjin intervenes.

“No.” *Fuck this.* “Let’s move.”

“He may find another soul.”

“I’m not asking for your fucking opinion, Hoseok,” Taehyung snaps. “I said we’re leaving.”

“Taehyung,” Dahee starts, “a couple more minutes won’t—”

“We shouldn’t have come down here to begin with. It’s too risky. A stupid idea because we don’t know what the plague is other than the fact that it kills."

What were they even thinking? Bringing Jungkook here like some kind of sacrificial lamb.

“It’s a bit late to backtrack now.”

“If one of you contests again what I’m saying, I’m gonna lose my damn mind and it won’t be pleasant for either of you.” A faint staccato rumbles in Taehyung's chest when his arcane shuffles through his breaths on its own. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“The plague only affects dragonborns, my son,” Junhyun reassures.

“It fu—” Taehyung’s mouth clicks shut. He doesn’t want to snap at his father. “Viper. We’re leaving,” he demands but Jungkook’s attention is drawn toward his flames that search around more frantically than before. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I—I’m not moving them.”

“What?”

“The same thing happened at the manor.” Jungkook rises to his feet. “They’re moving on their ow —”

The ground rumbles.

It shakes and moves for a brief moment that feels like an eternity. Then it stops, everything silent again, only to be disturbed by noises of cracking bones and rolling rocks.

Taehyung swears as he watches one of the dragon skeletons move.

Jungkook is raising a damn dead again.

The flames pool in the mouth of the skull and it spreads outward to surround its joints, entering the skull and ribcage that it fills. The small dragon skeleton stands before Jungkook, and solemnly lowers its head.

“Stop,” Taehyung says.

“I can’t, I—”

“Withdraw your arcane.”

“I can’t. I’m trying but it’s not letting me."

“We don’t know what you raising a dragonborn that died from the plague can do, so call your flames back. What if you get it too? What if you—”

“I can't—”

The skeleton of the dragon approaches Jungkook. Taehyung catches the light blue sphere at the middle of the ribcage, similar to the one from before but brighter here. When the skeleton is a foot away from Jungkook, the latter extends a hand to touch the soul. The soul fizzles to nothingness a second later.

Jungkook’s arm falls limp to his sides while the dragon skeleton crumbles to the ground. Jungkook begins to topple backward.

Taehyung races toward him.

The others rush too but Taehyung reaches him first, catching Jungkook right before his head hits the ground.

“G—God,” Jungkook whines and Taehyung knew it.

He fucking knew it.

“Hey, easy.” Taehyung lays Jungkook on the ground. “Remember it’s in your head, yeah?”

“Shit.” Yoongi kneels on Jungkook’s other side. “It’s like before?”

Taehyung ignores Yoongi to survey Jungkook who meets his gaze. There’s a determination in it amidst the tears that collect in Jungkook's eyes.

Yoongi flicks the cap of a small vial. “Drink this. It’ll put you to sleep for a few days.”

Jungkook pushes it away.

"Taehyung, hold him," Yoongi continues. "We have to make him drink this.”

Jungkook reaches to grab Taehyung’s arm. He shakes his head, tears sliding down his temple. So Taehyung shoves Yoongi aside and shuffles to hover above Jungkook. “Tell me."

“Feels like— Like something’s eating me,” Jungkook strains to say, an aborted sob catching in his throat.

“Where?” Taehyung asks and Jungkook pats his sternum, right where his breath pouch would be if he had one. “In your upper chest?”

“It’s eating. Inside. Feels like the plague is eating.”

“Eating what?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook quietly cries, and Taehyung wipes a tear with the sleeve of his shirt. “T—The breath pouch? Makes sense, but it’s— It’s eating something else, ‘cause it’s hungry.”

“You said the souls were gone. What if the plague feeds on the souls?”

Jungkook blinks, peering up at Taehyung. He opens his mouth to talk but a grunt leaves him instead.

“You described the plague as a pulse,” Taehyung says to his mother. “What if it has some kind of conscious will in it that prompts it to eat?”

“T—The plague could be sentient,” Jungkook adds.

“The Elders had ruled out this possibility,” Dahee answers.

“It’s like a hand is g—grabbing something inside of me.” Jungkook's fingers grip at his sweater. “It’s eating me alive. It hurts so much. It hurts, m—make it stop.”

Taehyung snatches the vial from Yoongi’s grasp. He cups the back of Jungkook’s head, tilting it enough to help him drink the vial’s content. Jungkook’s lids fall shut moments later, his body sagging on the ground.

“Will he be alright?” Namjoon worries.

“The plague does not affect humans. He will be fine.”

“If the plague feeds on souls, then it must only eat dragonborns' ones,” Jimin says.

“But why—” Dahee sighs. “I do not understand.”

“How could a disease be sentient for a starter?” Hoseok counters. “That doesn't make any damn sense.”

“The plague is arcanic. Anything could make sense.”

“I will visit the Elders,” Dahee says, Junhyun’s arm slung around her waist. “I'll tell them what we have found today.”

“Ask them about Kaiya, if they think the death of the guardian is due to the plague,” Taehyung adds.

“Right.” Dahee nods and peers at her mate. “Will you accompany me?”

“Of course, Darling. Let us leave now.” Junhyun wills out his wings before carrying Dahee in his arms. “We will reconvene tomorrow.” His gaze darts between Taehyung and Jungkook. “Take care of him, Son.”

Junhyun flies up, disappearing through the double doors.

“We should go too,” Yoongi says.

The warlock makes a move to lift Jungkook but Taehyung bats his hand away.

After sliding his arms under Jungkook's back and knees, Taehyung summons his wings, ignoring Yoongi’s noise of surprise. Taehyung does not waste a second to fly along the side of the cliff, eager to shake off the repulsion that creeps up his skin at so many people seeing his wings.

Taehyung lands on the platform and withdraws his wings. He peers down at Jungkook in his arms.

The tug is pulled, and Taehyung’s hold tightens around Jungkook.

“For how much longer will he be asleep? It's been two days already.”

“A few hours. He should wake up soon.”

“Do you think he’ll be fine?”

“Dahee and your Elders confirmed that the plague does not harm humans or warlocks. That is the only certainty we have.”

“I don’t know how much certainty there is with Jungkook’s necromancy,” Jimin muses, observing the expense of the forest before him.

He and Yoongi are both settled on the balcony of Jungkook’s bedroom, having decided to visit Taehyung and Jungkook’s house in the middle of the afternoon.

Jimin peeps inside the bedroom through the bay window.

Jungkook is laid down on his bed, covered by blankets neatly tucked underneath the mattress. He looks peaceful in his sleep, eons away from the pain that had etched his face.

Taehyung is slouched in his favorite armchair he had brought from the living room. His legs are stretched on the mattress and occupied by Revna who’s curled into a ball on his lap. He’s carving something, a gouge in his hand, the other holding a small piece of wood.

Jimin squints, focusing on the figurine Taehyung is creating.

It’s a snake, and it isn't a regular sculpture because it has some metal parts below the snake’s body.

The sight is horribly domestic, and Jimin smiles.

“Taehyung is carving a hair clip for Jungkook,” Jimin announces, because he's a snitch like that and he can’t wait for Jungkook to wake up so that he can relentlessly tease the two husbands.

“Hm?” Yoongi looks over his shoulder at Taehyung who appears to be too concentrated on his work to notice the two spying gossips.

“Has Jungkook recently complained about losing a hair clip or something like that?”

Yoongi’s gaze drifts on Jimin. “He did, actually. How do you know?”

Jimin snorts. “Taehyung may not seem like he does, but he listens and pays attention, especially for little things most would discard.”

“I see,” Yoongi chuckles, nursing a cup of tea. “I suppose he cares about Jungkook.”

“The fact that he hasn’t left Jungkook’s side once since he's been asleep should be enough of answer. He’s worried.”

“Is he?”

“Very much so,” Jimin laughs. “Carving is soothing for him. It takes his mind off of things.”

“And what is soothing for you?”

Jimin surveys Yoongi.

Jimin would have to be blind to not notice the way Yoongi’s eyes tend to trail after him, the warlock’s interest evident even if coy. Jimin hasn’t returned it. At least not in a serious manner. He doesn’t know what Yoongi wants, if he’s only after sex, or if there’s a little something more. Both are concerning either way.

Jimin can tell it’d be fun to fool around with Yoongi, but it’d inevitably grow messy, and he doesn’t wish to disturb the *thing* that is blossoming between Taehyung and Jungkook.

“Sculpting as well but with metal,” Jimin says. It’s a safe answer. Impersonal enough. Then Jimin returns the question. Friends do this.

“I like writing. Expected considering my arcane, I know.”

“Writing what?” It’s okay if Jimin inquires about this, right? It doesn’t have to mean anything.

“Stories, poems, songs. A bit of everything.”

“Ehh, will you write an ode to my beauty some day?” Jimin teases before he can shut his fucking mouth.

Yoongi flushes.

It’s annoying.

It’s cute.

Yet so damn annoying because Jimin shouldn’t find this cute.

“You’d have to earn it,” Yoongi replies.

Jimin’s mouth opens, ready to fire a flirtatious answer, but he bites on the inner side of his cheek. “We’ll see, then." Jimin can feel Yoongi’s gaze boring onto the side of his head. “What?”

“You’re weird.”

Jimin splutters. “Fuck you?”

“I don’t necessarily mean in a bad way,” Yoongi says but he doesn’t sound very apologetic.

“Oh because that is sooo comforting to hear,” Jimin snips but it comes off playful. He’s fond of the warlock. He knows he shouldn’t be, but he can’t help it. Because Yoongi is so damn *cute*, a knowledge Jimin has acquired when he had been helping the man with various things.

“You clearly find me attractive,” Yoongi starts.

Jimin’s tea goes down the wrong pipe.

“You flirt with me every now and then, yet you never take it any further. The opposite. And if *I* try to make advances to you, I’m met with a wall.”

Jimin coughs and clears his throat. His smile wavers, a pit of unease carving in his chest. “It’d be a hellish mess if we’re to fool around.”

“Would it?”

“Yes.”

“Or is there another reason why you keep pushing me away yet pulling me back in with flirty teasing?”

Jimin’s jaw clenches. “I don’t do relationships.”

“I never asked for that,” Yoongi notes, which is true, and Jimin’s argument falls flat.

“I don’t have sex with people that will stay around when I’ll eventually want them to leave. We’d still have to see each other because you’re Jungkook’s close friend. I’ll hate that. Then I’ll hate *you*.” It’s always the same pattern. Fun trailed by boredom and ending in dislike or hatred.

“Do you believe in love? The romantic kind,” Yoongi specifies, comfortably loitering on his lounging chair.

“For others? Yes. For myself? No."

“Why not for yourself?”

Jimin chuckles without humor.

“I’m listening.” Yoongi tilts his head toward Jimin but the latter refuses to meet his eyes.

“No one ever stays, and those who do stay always end up hurting me in the end. It’s better to be the one to leave first.”

“You can be loved, Jimin.”

“My exes would beg to differ,” Jimin counters, unable to repress the venom that seeps in his voice.

“They were foolish."

“That’s the thing,” Jimin begins and finally peers at Yoongi. “They weren’t. They were smart. I’m flawed, like everyone else is, but the problem with mine is that they’re— They’re heavy. You’ve seen Taehyung’s temper, yeah? I’m *a lot* worse than him. My issues make for an exquisite cocktail everyone wants to run away from. Understandably so.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be loved. You just need someone brave enough to do so.”

Jimin barks out a laugh and it comes out a lot more mean than intended. “I know how the song goes. *‘I can handle you, Jimin. I’m brave enough’.* And next thing I know I’m thrown aside like a fucking dirty rag worthy of nothing. Happened in the past.” Jimin is glad Taehyung got the chance to land several punches and kicks on the guy when Jimin had been too heartbroken to get out of bed. “I fell for a guy. Hard. Thought he had too but…” He shrugs.

“I’m sorry."

“It’s in the past,” Jimin dismisses with a grin. “I thought I’d give love one last chance but it ended up being one of the worst decisions in my life. Nearly died from it, actually. So this isn’t for me anymore! I’m happy with what I have.”

“Are you?”

No.

“Yes. I get to have a decent lay here and there, a good one when I’m lucky. No strings attached. No effusion of feelings or any of that nonsense. It’s great,” Jimin lies.

It’s lonely.

It leaves Jimin crying alone in his bed some nights when the solitude gets too much.

“I guess it is."

“Yup.” Jimin drinks from his tea to swallow down the swelling lump in his throat. “Do you—”

The balcony’s glass door slides open.

Jimin and Yoongi turn around.

“When should he wake up?” Taehyung asks.

“Soon,” Yoongi replies.

One of Taehyung’s eyes twitches. “When the fuck is soon?”

“In a few hours."

“How *many* is a few hours?” Taehyung irritably presses.

Jimin hides his smile behind his cup.

“Between two to five hours.”

“He’ll be fine,” Jimin assures.

Taehyung’s glare shifts from Yoongi to settle on Jimin. “He raised a dragonborn who was killed by the plague. You don’t know if he’ll be fine.”

“The Elders said it only attacks us."

“Yeah and they also said the plague isn’t sentient yet the Viper basically confirmed the opposite so what the fuck do the Elders know at this point,” Taehyung retorts.

“If the plague was to kill humans or warlocks, it would have already,” Jimin reasons, amused by Taehyung's snappy mood.

“I guess. It’s so damn quiet, it’s pissing me off,” Taehyung mutters and slides the door closed as he walks back inside the bedroom. He plops down on The Armchair and proceeds to sulk as he

continues to carve, his face knitted around a glower.

Jimin watches how Revna watches Taehyung who's watching Jungkook in some sort of confusing inception. The way Taehyung surveys Jungkook for a few seconds before going back to his carving task reminds Jimin of how Taehyung had stared at Jungkook in the graveyard.

Taehyung seems curious about Jungkook, in a way Jimin doesn't recall ever seeing Taehyung like.

Jimin is happy that his brother has found someone to be curious of and who mirrors said interest. He wishes to find someone who'd be loyal and devoted to him like this, where he would feel safe to reciprocate the feelings. However the sole thought of it shuts his mind down.

"They've grown closer," Yoongi notes, detracting Jimin from his spiraling thoughts.

"They have."

"It seems the manor has done some good for them."

"Well, it definitely helped Taehyung realize that he has no reason to be frightened of Jungkook."

Yoongi's brows fly up his forehead. "He was scared of Jungkook?"

"Not scared, *terrified* ," Jimin corrects. "Taehyung's fear for humans transcends his hatred for them. I think you can understand why."

Yoongi is silent for a moment, lowering his cup on his lap. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"He's not anymore though, so he'll grow obnoxiously caring for Jungkook, like he currently is," Jimin jests and Yoongi laughs. "He's like a frowning mother hen for those he cares about."

"Jungkook will be in good hands, then," Yoongi smiles. "Is Taehyung scared of me?"

"I'm not sure... But if he is, it's not as much as he had been of Jungkook."

"As long as he doesn't hurt Jungkook, all is well."

"If he does, it won't be purposeful, and he'll do his best to make up for it."

"The problem is that Jungkook can be too forgiving sometimes. He has too much empathy for others, yet so little for himself," Yoongi sighs. "Jungkook deserves happiness and peace after the life he led."

Jimin glances at Yoongi, catching the guilt that paints the warlock's face. "Seohyung was really horrible with him, uh?"

Yoongi nods. "She'd isolate him a lot. She'd do everything in her power to make sure Jungkook never felt loved, and she unfortunately succeeded."

"What about you and Namjoon?"

"I was often kept separated from them to work for Seohyung and Sungmin. I barely got to see them," Yoongi answers. "Namjoon is the only one who was allowed in Jungkook's proximity since he was assigned to be his page when they were toddlers. But even then it always was in a

controlled environment, with little to no freedom. This is all Jungkook has been forced to know: control; unwanted and cold."

"Fucking hell… Must have been hard on you three."

"Never as much as what Jungkook has gone through."

"I would've killed the Queen if she had been like that with Taehyung."

"I'd like to, eventually, but it's Jungkook's decision to make."

Jimin agrees with a nod. "Plus we'll be here to help with anything, especially Taehyung."

Yoongi doesn't reply right away, his nails drumming on the armrest of his chair. "There's a lot that Jungkook wants. I don't know if Taehyung can give him that."

"Taehyung made a storm to calm Jungkook. He forsook his own wounds to take care of Jungkook's. He's been feeding him as well lately, always serving Jungkook first then us before himself, and that's a *huge* thing for dragonborns, and Taehyung in particular. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"I hope so." Yoongi peers behind. "Jungkook has to be given all he wants after being granted nothing."

"He'll have it."

"You deserve the same too."

"I know," Jimin says without missing a beat. "I'm supplying myself with all that is good." Even if it never really works, and even if it sometimes makes matters worse because why does Jimin always have to give himself everything? "Anyway, I need to go."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to meet up with someone."

"A fling?"

Jimin's nose curls in distaste. "No, nothing like that." He doesn't want to go. He doesn't want to see the dragonborn, but the latter had been insistent.

"Who, then?"

"Woobin," Jimin replies and leaves his cup on the wooden table as he stands.

"Woobin?"

"Yup. He wants to talk to me about something important."

"This could be a trap."

"I know, but— Actually," Jimin backtracks. "Want to join?"

They reach the meeting point an hour or so later.

Woobin is already there, in his human form and waiting.

Jimin sniffs the air. He doesn't sense any other presence, so he lands on the ground and turns. "I brought a guardian just in case!" Jimin beams when Woobin snarls at Yoongi.

Woobin paces around for a bit, his gaze darting around before he stills and stares at Jimin. "Jimin," he greets.

"Hey, little brother," Jimin smiles and leisurely walks ahead. "It's been a while."

"*Little brother?"* Yoongi squeaks.

Ah. Yeah. Jimin may have purposefully omitted to share this important detail with the warlock. "Surprise?" He says and swivels around to survey a bewildered Yoongi. "Woobin's my little brother. Blood related, unfortunately."

"Then it means that…"

"Seungwon is my father, yes. Also unfortunately."

Taehyung nips at the snake's head, chipping away the wood bit by bit. He remembers Jungkook mentioning having lost a hair clip and how annoying it is to get ready because of the way his hair gets on his face. The new hair clip might be too big though, Taehyung muses and peers at the sleeping Prince.

The night from two days ago hasn't left him. He doesn't really know why but it's there, living in his mind, replaying Jungkook's reactions to a hand on his nape, and the curiosity that has consequently flared in Taehyung.

However Taehyung's musings are bothered by the basement clusterfuck.

Taehyung can't help but worry, which is not as uncanny anymore. Worrying for a human. A warlock, but a human nonetheless.

Jungkook makes a pained sound, his features furrowing around a wince. Taehyung straightens up. He rests his tools on the bed to scoot forward in his chair and lean near Jungkook. One of his hands is placed at the juncture of Jungkook's neck and shoulder.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The back of his other hand rests above Jungkook's forehead. The temperature is normal, a bit warm, but nothing alarming. Jungkook doesn't look pale like he had in the forest, at least, even if the silence is as unnerving as it had been back then.

Taehyung relaxes in his seat after checking Jungkook's vitals a second time, Revna curled back on his lap.

"Why did you want to meet? We haven't talked in years."

"I know you don't trust me, but—"

"That's putting it very kindly," Jimin says. "Funny how my own brother would throw me to the lion over and over again while I was doing my best to protect him from Father, eh?"

Woobin smiles, sardonic. "And who left me alone with him? Who ran away like a coward?"

The guilt seers in Jimin's chest. "Don't. I told you to come with me but—"

"It doesn't matter anymore," Woobin dismisses. "There's something you must know: there was a council meeting."

"I know," Jimin snips. "Three days ago."

"No. There was another last night."

Jimin stares at his brother for a moment before peering at Yoongi who appears as lost as Jimin feels. "What? But Taehyung and Dahee—" He halts, understanding slowly washing over him.

"This Dohyun human had been telling the truth about the primordial stone," Woobin says. "But he told us something else that the Elders knew yet kept to themselves. Because of the valuable knowledge Dohyun gave to the Council, a vote was made. Dohyun will be given a reward in return for his cooperation but— He works with my father."

"We know that already."

"You don't understand…." Woobin shakes his head, skittish and fidgeting on his spot. "After what happened at the Council three days ago, my— *Our* father wants them dead."

"Them who?" Yoongi asks even if they already know the answer.

"Taehyung and Jungkook."

"Seungwon can't kill them," Jimin scoffs.

"Twenty armed dragonborn leaders can, however," Woobin says, and alarm bells ring in Jimin's head. "Dohyun also has a lizard with him that he said can help subdue Taehyung. We were all given some sort of weird earplugs."

"Fuck. When—"

"Tomorrow afternoon," Woobin says. "They'll raid Taehyung and Jungkook's house. You have to warn them but *please* keep me out of this and don't— Don't mention that I'm the one who told

you, okay?”

Jimin stalks closer to his brother until less than a foot is left between them and snatches him by the collar. “Why the fuck are you helping us? Is this some kind of trick?”

“I’m tired, Jimin,” Woobin says and Jimin only notices then the dark circles under his brother’s eyes, or the bruises that mark his collarbones and left cheek. “I’m tired of being with him, of being scared. All the time. I’m so scared I can’t even run away from him,” he rasps, tears collecting in his eyes. “I want out and— And at the meeting I hoped Taehyung would kill Father but in the end I saved him and I don't even know why.”

The roar of several wings erupts in the sky.

It’s far, and most importantly large enough to be heard.

Jimin’s gaze darts on the empty sky before it drifts on his brother. “You said tomorrow."

Woobin looks shocked. “I— That’s what Father told me.”

“You—” Jimin turns around. “We have to go! Now!”

A thunder booms in the sky, loud.

Nearby.

Taehyung springs up. He marches toward the balcony and he sees it then: the thunder of perhaps two dozen dragons. They fly closer and lower, their destination becoming clear to Taehyung.

Taehyung swears when he recognizes the members of the thunder.

He yanks the thick curtains shut, effectively concealing Jungkook from any outsider eye. He whistles.

Revna enters the bedroom a few seconds later.

“Stay with him,” Taehyung instructs and lays her on the bed.

Revna emits this series of clicks she tends to make whenever she’s confused or asks a question.

“I don’t know what’s happening. I’m going downstairs, so keep an eye on him. If something happens here while I'm away, only come to me if it's safe to do so, alright?”

Revna nods.

After one last look at the unconscious prince and wary basilisk, Taehyung makes down.

He fastens his shoes then opens the entrance door, closing it behind him as he walks through his garden to pause at the center. He's far enough to shift without destroying the house, but also close

enough to immediately intervene if anyone tries to break inside.

The ground shakes under Taehyung when the dragons land one by one.

Taehyung's arcane awakens in his breath pouch.

Twenty or so members of the Council soon face him, including Woosung, Byunghun and Seungwon. Nara and Jihee are absent, along with a few more members, Taehyung notes, and his wariness grows tenfold.

Hands in his pants' pockets, Taehyung adopts a nonchalant front as his gaze drags across the dragonborns who all turn to their human self. "I'm busy," he starts.

"I believe the reason for our visit is more important than anything else that may have been occupying you," Byunghun retorts.

"Which is?"

"We have been speaking about you, dove," the man with the scent says.

Taehyung freezes. He doesn't look in the direction of the voice, but he can see the way Woosung's daughter stands tall behind the man with the scent, her stance protective.

"A deal has been made after a vote was taken," Byunghun says, leading the conversation.

Woosung is mute. He seems contrite, upset, even.

"How come my mother and I were not informed of said vote?"

"Because your choice would have been biased. For the right reasons," Byunghun adds with a shit-eating smile.

"Name the reason for your visit, if so. As I said I'm busy," Taehyung presses, unable to contain the ire that coats his voice.

"Dohyun has kindly shared crucial information regarding the primordial stone and its goal to eradicate dragonborns. However that is not all. He has taken us to a pit," Byunghun says.

Horror dawns on Taehyung.

"One littered with dragon bones."

Fuck.

"We have been made aware that a disease, a *plague*, is killing our kind, a secret *you* and the Elders have kept from the Council," Byunghun snips, his timber gravelly.

Fucking shit.

All at once, Taehyung grasps how dire the situation is.

Jungkook is unconscious. Dahee and Junhyun have left to visit the Elders. Jimin and Yoongi flew off an hour ago. Hoseok, Seokjin and Namjoon are together at Vanae's market.

Taehyung is alone.

“Have you spoken to the Elders?” Taehyung says while he weighs his options. Running away isn’t possible. Most dragons are faster than Taehyung whose speed is impeded by his size.

“No,” Woosung speaks for the first time. “We were first taken to the pit of bones. The vote—”

“If it hadn't been for Dohyun, the Council would have not been made aware that a plague is decimating our kind, has been for years,” Byunghun interrupts.

“He’s a liar and manipulator.” Taehyung doesn’t mean for his words to come out so clipped — *scared* — but they do anyway because he’s indirectly confronting the man with the scent.

“My dove,” Dohyun chuckles, prompting an immediate cold sweat that chills Taehyung’s spine. “You know by now that I have trusted connections and sources. I care about you, and I would be heartbroken to see you be taken away by the plague. However the Council knows now, and they will be of aid.”

Taehyung’s skin crawls. He wants to bolt out of here but he can’t yet. He can’t *at all.* He needs to gain time until his parents, Jimin or Yoongi arrive, and the urgency grows when he catches the small lizard on the man with the scent’s shoulder.

“This human is the man who abducted me six years ago,” Taehyung says, a shot in the dark. “He tortured me for the six months I was gone. You should not put any faith in what he says. He doesn't care about dragonborns.”

Flashes of shock pass over the leaders’ faces, even Byunghun’s, but it’s erased by an expected apathy.

“It does not change anything,” Byunghun counters, as Taehyung knew he would.

The Council never held Taehyung in their heart, after all.

“It is in the past, and Dohyun is making amends for his misdeeds. He *has* given us priceless information, and he is willing to help us more. Saving thousands of lives is more valuable than a long forgotten feud. Hence, as promised to Dohyun for his selfless help in spite of the threat your husband opposed to him,” Byunghun says with barely concealed scorn, “we are here to retrieve the due he has asked for.”

“Which is?”

“Jeon Jungkook.”

Taehyung grows impossibly.

“His parents have agreed to a change of betrothed after exchanging with Dohyun,” Byunghun says.

Bile rises at the back of Taehyung’s throat.

“You will in return be free to marry whoever you desire. Your wish will finally be granted to you, Taehyung.”

Yeah.

This is not happening.

“There’s been an issue with Jungkook,” Taehyung says, feeling unusually calm. “He’s sick and asleep.”

“That is no trouble,” Byunghun dismisses with a wave of his hand. “However you must know that your compliance is expected. Sanctions will be given if you refuse to obey the results of a vote, starting by your banishment from the Council.”

Taehyung nods and turns around.

“Do not run away, Taehyung.”

Taehyung does not intend to.

He walks inside his house then up to the second floor.

His motions are mechanical when he fastens the dagger’s sheathe around Jungkook’s waist and tugs the shirt low to hide the weapon. The ruby is next that Taehyung detaches from his own neck to lock it around Jungkook’s. He crouches in front of the bed.

“I need you to get inside the ruby,” Taehyung says to Revna but she makes a noise of contest. “Don’t leave unless I ask you to, and try to make yourself as discreet as possible if you have to attack.” Revna nods then nudges Taehyung’s cheek. “It’ll be fine. I’ll handle it. But if anyone gets anywhere near him: bite. If a hand that is not mine reaches for him: bite. You bite to kill. We’ve got to protect each other and him, Revna. Jungkook only has us right now. Do you understand?”

Revna clicks her tongue. She bumps her snout against Taehyung’s nose before sliding up the bed to vanish inside the ruby.

Taehyung carries Jungkook in his arms.

He steps outside not long after.

His gaze meets Woosung's who looks increasingly peeved. Woosung’s hands are tied by the vote, Taehyung knows this, and so he understands the man’s inaction. If anyone is to go against the results of a vote made by the Council, it would be seen as treason.

Taehyung also knows this.

The chaos within him crackles. It swirls where his breaths are, the latter dormant. Waiting.

Taehyung lays Jungkook on the ground, the Prince clad in a clean pair of pajamas and in a sweater that had once belonged to Taehyung.

“Your cooperation is deeply appreciated, Taehyung,” Byunghun begins, "we will—”

Taehyung turns to his dragon self and when Byunghun steps forward, Taehyung does not waste a second to swipe his forelimb at him, the man narrowly avoiding the sharp claws. The soil rumbles when Taehyung slams his talon on the ground. He stands over Jungkook and a roar tears out of his throat, sinister and thundering. It resonates through the silence, flocks of birds dispersing from the trees.

It’s a challenge to be taken, if some dare to.

A few members of the Council do.

Only half of them shift at first but soon the rest follow, the 18 leaders facing Taehyung.

Taehyung's claws dig into the ground, dislodging bits of grass and soil. A staccato elevates in the deceptive quietude as he races through his breaths. Lightning crackles along his form, snapping in any and every direction yet mindful of Jungkook below him.

“Kim Taehyung. The Council has voted. If you do not obey, we will be forced to subdue you,” Byunghun warns. “Dohyun?”

“It saddens me we need to go this far,” the man with the scent sighs. He glances at the lizard on his shoulder. “Go ahead.”

The lizard’s mouth opens.

The pain is expected, however the tune must be different because instead of forcing him to his human form, it worsens the pain into something agonizing that burns through his every limbs.

Taehyung forgoes the maddening pain to collect lightning and fire in his mouth. The cone he breathes out chars the grass, and the leaders are forced to leap backward lest they burn to ashes too. Taehyung uses this momentum to breath a burst of force next that hauls the dragonborns farther back.

One of the leaders, his dragon form small, flies underneath Taehyung from the back. His claws reach for Jungkook but Taehyung sends the dragon to fly through the forest with a hit of his tail. Taehyung folds his gnarled fingers of a talon around the Prince. *Safe.*

Taehyung snarls when he peers ahead.

Dragonborns have a tool to subdue a dragon, if need be.

It hasn’t been used in decades, as far as Taehyung knows, but he recognizes the chains and the acute spikes. It’s an old and barbaric contraption, infused with an arcane that renders the spikes immovable and allows the chains to resist any attack a dragon may try.

Taehyung’s wings bat up and down. Staying on the ground is too dangerous.

Before he gets to fly any higher than a foot, the lullaby sharpens, the throes in his limbs too, dizzying. One of the dragons throws a spike. Taehyung unsteadily avoids it, however he's not fast enough to evade the two dragons that loop one of the chains around his chest, the immovable rods plunged down.

Taehyung roars, rage bubbling through his veins as he tries to free himself from his bindings. A leader flies by his face and snatches her by the throat to slam her down, a distraction that meets its purpose when two more chains are slung over his spine and sunk into the ground.

The staccato quivers in his throat. A cone of fire and lightning leaves his mouth in an endless stream that he breathes from side to side, hitting several targets but not enough.

Thunder snaps above him, the cold winter air blending with the warmth of his fire. The sun that had been shining bright disappears, concealed by forming clouds.

Taehyung wrestles against the chains but it's weakened by the weight of the immovable rods, by the one of his fear as he's reminded of his time with the man with the scent, of the shackles that had once stolen his freedom.

He fights: claws tearing through flesh, teeth snapping bones, tails slamming into bodies, but Taehyung has to hold back. He can't kill no matter how stifling the bloodthirst is. Then there's the fear too; how conscious Taehyung is of *his* presence, terrified of what may occur if he dares hurting *him.*

His respiration becomes laborious from the ever growing pain and the panic because he’s being trapped again.

He's trapped with him.

A strangled groan escapes him when more pain shoots in several spots on his left thigh and leg that is yanked on by the jaws of several dragons.

Taehyung collapses on his stomach as his equilibrium is disturbed.

Two pairs of chains are coiled around his neck in a makeshift collar. They pull, squeezing the air from Taehyung’s throat. The chains’ rods are planted, tethering his head to the ground, then his tail.

Taehyung jerks and trashes and snarls and *yanks* but nothing works. More pain fires in his body, this time echoed in his right wing.

Alarm bells set off in him.

Seungwon is in his dragon form, piercing a rod through the skin of Taehyung’s wing.

“And you plead beautifully as well. Aren’t you perfect?”

The laceration of Taehyung’s left wing is unexpected and wrenches a cry out of him.

“Shush, my dove. We are barely starting.”

Taehyung tries not to look at the man with the scent but his gaze drifts on him.

The man is smiling.

“My dove… Be kind for me, yes? I do not wish to see you hurt any further. You must submit.”

Taehyung nearly does. The impulse is there, but he forsakes it.

He struggles in the net of immovable chains. He thinks about turning back to human for a second, however he knows that the second he does so, the giant chains will crush both him and Jungkook.

Head twisted to the side and maw pressed to the soil, Taehyung begins to wonder if it is worth holding back.

The Council isn't, after all.

A sphere of raw force collects on his tongue and he aims it at the enemy group, several of the leaders hurled away, the trees flattened in a straight line down the horizon. The attack opens a window for more chains to fasten around Taehyung, for more spikes to be drilled through his flesh. *His wings.*

A whine dies at the back of his throat.

The chains are tightened around his neck, squeezing his airways.

Rain begins to fall, the sky draping a dark, stormy veil over the area. It extinguishes the fire that had been eating at the trees and grass, but it does nothing to tame the one raging within Taehyung. The wrath is blinding, ebbing away at what sliver of control he has left and *he should have killed them.*

He should have killed those fucking cowards and tore their throat and limbs apart but the man with the scent is here and Taehyung shouldn't hurt him so he *has* to be careful, doesn't he? Because he's a coward too.

Byunghun turns to human as dragons grab Taehyung's right forelimb, pulling it from where it had been tucked below him. More chains are cuffed around it before he can budge, completely enslaving him to the leaders' will.

"Let go, or you will be expelled from the Council and prosecuted in Bastille for defiance and endangerment of the members of the Council," Byunghun says, his voice partially drowned by the lizard's song.

"That is *not* what we had agreed upon!" Woosung intervenes. "Release him at once!"

"The Council has voted," Byunghun says. "You have no more say in this matter than any other participant."

Claws scratch at his right front talon. They try to pry his fingers loose from where he's holding Jungkook. Taehyung envelops his talon with flames. He makes sure to not let them flicker near Jungkook who's tucked in his palm.

It briefly helps, the dragons jerking away from the fire. Some don't care, however, and they lacerate through Taehyung's skin, deep enough to damage the tendons of his wrist and gnarled fingers in return for some burns.

Taehyung's grip around Jungkook slackens.

His flames dissipate, lungs burning from lack of air.

Taehyung watches with muted horror as Jungkook is pulled out of his grasp, then carried to the man with the scent.

Taehyung thinks about Revna then, however he catches a glint of gold and red near the outskirts of the forest, along with her unmoving body next to it.

The lizard falls quiet.

The man with the scent smiles when Jungkook is dropped in his extended arms. “Oh, he’s quite heavy,” he chuckles. “Thank you for your hard work, everyone. I believe it would be judicious to keep Taehyung restrained until we have reached a safer location.”

It's eerie, how fury transcends terror. How Taehyung wants to tear asunder rather than run away because someone is stealing his husband. Someone is taking Jungkook away from Taehyung, and Taehyung's chaos hollers.

The rain is cold on Taehyung’s spine, splattering across his scales and wings.

Plop…

The man with the scent has a smile on his face that crinkles the corner of his eyes, the same one Taehyung has seen so many times.

Plop…

Who cares about repercussions, right?

Who cares about keeping those fools alive when Jungkook is about to be flown away and delivered to the wolves. To *him*. Where Jungkook may be killed by *him* or Seungwon. It doesn’t matter when Taehyung is being forced to submit, chained down like a feral beast, as a few of his peers have craved to witness.

Plop...

Plop…

The leaders are speaking together, all gathered in a group, but Taehyung isn’t listening. Half of them shift back to dragons and start to fly, including Byunghun who presents his palm for the man with the scent to climb on.

There’s something revolting about the way the man cradles Jungkook against his chest.

Taehyung attempts one more attack: a breath of force he aims at Byunghun, but the latter deflects it with a sphere of wind and vine he forms around himself.

Byunghun flies away.

Taehyung closes his eyes.

Plop…

Plop…

Plop…

Blood drips from Taehyung’s wounds.

It’s a reminder.

It’s a staccato that cracks and breaks in disuse.

It’s an awakening.

He selects a dusty arrow, discarded for over a decade, yet more sanguine than any other in the roulette of his breaths.

“Let us leave, everyone.”

Plop…

“Some of us should stay to free Taehyung.”

“We should discuss whether or *not* we should free him in the first place. He’ll be a danger to us, and you’ve seen what he’s done to Seungwon. Taehyung is a chaos dragon. He has to be prosecuted in Bastille for his defiance anyway.”

Plop…

“Good point. Perhaps we…”

Plop…

Plop…

Plop…

The arrow staggers past his breaths one after another: fire, wind, force, lightning, healing. It drags over the sixth segment.

Plop.

It comes to a halt on the seventh breath.

It’s desperation, because Taehyung doesn’t know what will happen to Jungkook. It’s self-preservation too because Taehyung could spend the rest of his life in Bastille.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Jungkook was supposed to wake up and say good morning to Taehyung and be annoying like he always is. Taehyung was supposed to finish carving the hair clip. And then—

“…should gather the remainder of the Council so we can take another vote as soon as possible.”

This isn’t—

“Jaesung, stay with me too.”

This isn’t happening.

“What if he manages to break free though?”

“He can’t with the immovable rods. He’s trapped here.”

This is not happening.

“It's why I never wanted to allow a chaos dragon at the Council. Unstable beasts corrupted by madness.”

“He’s Dahee’s son and Vanae’s heir.”

“Still. He's a chaos dragon. He’s too…”

Plop.

Plop.

Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop. Plo —

Taehyung’s teeth sink into his front talon. They tear through the flesh.

Gasps and exclamations of surprise follow suit.

Taehyung has always considered his sixth and seventh breath as worthless. The former doesn’t serve any valuable purpose at all, too generic and slow. The latter, however, is as useless as it is damning and unsafe.

Dahee had forbidden him from using this last breath after discovering its countenance. She had known it would only heighten people's wariness toward Taehyung, a chaos dragon. So Taehyung had learned to repress it at a young age.

Throughout the years, Taehyung and his family have kept a tied tongue regarding his seventh breath for many reasons. One of them is how this breath is intertwined with an arcane deemed too vile and grisly. Another is that said arcane is a forbidden and expunged one. The last one gives reason to the first.

The rain has stopped.

Taehyung has a choice to make.

He could wait for his family, regardless of what may be done to Jungkook and himself. Or he could let loose. Wholly.

Madly.

Arcane rushes through Taehyung’s veins.

Through his blood.

The carmine flow stops, then it coagulates. Soon, the blood is more of a ruby.

Taehyung uses his regenerative breath to start healing his injuries and rejuvenate the lost blood. He has an unlimited supply of it, after all.

Taehyung wonders if the chains are similar to those that had been shackling him at the manor, where nothing can tear through them. Perhaps these may be broken, if done by an arcane no one would think of creating a resistance for.

Taehyung shushes his healing breath to bite through his forelimb once more. He discards the curious gazes that fall on him. He bites a second time. A third. A fourth. *Again and again and again,* frenetic. In-between each bite, he hardens his blood, allowing it to take shape.

The pain is benign. He's had worse.

The solidifying blood soon forms a sharp blade on his talon. Taehyung stretches his wounded limb as much as his bindings allow him, giving himself more momentum. Then, he yanks his arm back.

His blood cuts through one of the chains like butter.

The hoops loudly clank down. Taehyung's eyes widen because the most he had expected had been absolutely *nothing* .

Soon, his entire limb is out of its shackles.

From that point onward, freeing himself is easy.

The bloody blade suffices to cut the remainder of the net of chains wrapped around his neck, chest and tail. His gaze darts on the shocked and alarmed leaders. Some of them shift to dragons and begin to bolt away.

Taehyung can feel their wariness. He can taste their fear on his tongue, metallic and pungent. *Wonderful.*

He wrenches his wings out of the rods, the last manacle now gone. He summons his healing breath to tend to the holes pierced through them. His head darts up.

Byunghun is far ahead in the canopy, a narrowing dot that is too fast for Taehyung to catch up to.

Taehyung rips his claws through his chest. He doesn't groan at the sharp pain that shoots through his body. Instead he withdraws his healing breath. It's too difficult to use it along with his unstable seventh breath, and Taehyung needs his gashes to bleed for a little longer.

Blood freely flows down from the lacerations and it doesn't get to splatter across the grass. The streams of blood coagulate into a spike that Taehyung slowly pulls out of his chest. When the spear is the length of his forelimb, Taehyung promptly discards his seventh breath to use his healing one. The switch causes some difficulties that impede the effectiveness of his regenerative ability.

It doesn't matter.

Taehyung stares at Byunghun, not a single blink tearing through his concentration.

His gnarled fingers and claws clench onto the lance of blood. His arm draws back as he aligns Byunghun's form with the point of the weapon. He adjusts his aim. He does not want to hit Jungkook. Then, he stills. His grip constricts around the spear.

The spear booms then whistles through the air when Taehyung hurls it forward.

Taehyung watches and waits.

The spear must tear through Byunghun's protective bubble because the dot he makes in the distance topples down.

Taehyung moves. He propels himself high up and immediately flies toward the thunder ahead of him.

The five leaders that had stayed with him on ground attempt to stop him, however Taehyung has to waste a moment to seize one of the dragons by the neck, rip his claws through their left wing and heave them at another dragon, the two crashing down.

The other three stay back afterward, and Taehyung resumes his flight.

A minute passes, endless, but he has soon crossed enough distance to see the group of a dozen dragons that lands. Byunghun and the other dragons are on the ground, now right below Taehyung.

Taehyung is still outnumbered, but it holds no importance anymore. He won't make the same mistakes he has done earlier. His bloodied wings swing up and down, keeping him afloat.

Byunghun tries to fly away once more.

Taehyung crosses his forelimbs and his claws sink into their inner side, tearing through veins and arteries. Blood cascades down that he hardens into smaller spikes. He throws two at Byunghun that bore through his leg, and the dragon crumbles down. Another pair pierces through a wing then a third through a hind leg, pinning Byunghun down. He flings a few more at the other dragons and Woosung's daughter who steps back.

The lizard's shrill rips through Taehyung's brain.

The man with the scent tumbles out of Byunghun's talon, Jungkook following suit as the man loses his grasp around him.

Taehyung dives down.

The man with the scent races to grab Jungkook. He's closer. His gaze flickers upward, meeting Taehyung's. The fear freezes Taehyung for a brief instance, but Jungkook will be taken away if Taehyung does not *fucking move*, and so Taehyung lurches forward.

His claws barely miss the man with the scent as the latter is yanked backward by Woosung's daughter. Jungkook falls from the man's arms, however.

Taehyung reaches for Jungkook as other dragons do. A group of them charges at Taehyung, shoving him to the side.

However Taehyung has been faster, Jungkook secured in his talon.

Taehyung rolls across the ground, trees breaking underneath him. He springs back up. The leaders face him, Woosung's daughter and the man with the scent too.

Taehyung lays Jungkook below him to free all of his talons. He glances down. Jungkook is still asleep. There's some blood on his cheek, right where a bruise is.

"T—Taehyung, you will be tried, for treason," Byunghun pants, aided on his feet by a couple of leaders that have turned to humans.

An idea flashes in Taehyung's mind.

He brings a wrist to his muzzle that he bites on, his teeth puncturing a plethora of holes through the flesh.

“Kim Taehyung! We demand that you submit!”

A chuckle rumbles in Taehyung’s throat but it comes out as gravelly rumble instead.

He tilts his head backward until all he can see is the expense of blue and gray, then of red and white when his talon hovers above his face. His jaws part open. Drops of blood drip from where the roms of punctures. They trickle down inside his mouth, solidifying halfway through in a rain of sharp rubies that he collects on his tongue.

The staccato rumbles, echoing the thunder that shreds through the silence.

When Taehyung's maw opens again, it’s around a cone of wind and bloody rubies that he breathes out on his opponents.

Because this is what the Council is now: a challenge to be defeated.

The leaders don’t get the chance to avoid the flurry of small shrapnel that cut and slash and bore through them. Yells and exclamations of pain erupt in the area as they shift to dragons to fly away from the blizzard of Taehyung’s blood that comes to halt moments later.

Taehyung coughs and staggers forward, mindful of Jungkook beneath him. The blood he had hardened liquefies when he focuses on healing himself.

It would be so easy to kill if he wasn’t mangled by the shrill, dizzied from the cycle of blood loss and gain and loss and gain once more.

He wants to kill, however. He won’t, but he could. He really could. *He should.* He can’t help but consider it for a fleeting moment of lunacy.

Taehyung uses this moment of inattention from the leaders to summon his seventh breath and form another spear of blood after lacerating a path down his chest. However a spear isn’t the best weapon to fight a thunder of dragon. It’s too singular. Not destructive enough. He could choose his force or fire breath, but the chaos in Taehyung craves for violence, so Taehyung listens.

He sculpts a blade at the tip of the spear, the latter soon becoming an axe.

“Kim Taehyung! You must—”

Taehyung swings the blood axe.

It whirs past a few dragons but it does not miss Byunghun, and glee bursts within Taehyung. The edge of the blade is dull, purposefully so because Taehyung *can’t kill*, however he can crush and break, as the axe’s blade does when it collides against Byunghun’s side and heaves him through the trees.

Then, Taehyung summons his wind breath. He allows it to wrap around the blood axe. The blade is much wider and longer now. More acute too. Taehyung can crush and break, but he can sever and tear without killing as well.

Something must have happened to the lizard as well because the shrill is gone.

“Everyone move!”

“Now!”

Taehyung withdraws his forelimb and whirls the axe in an arc in front of him. The trees are cut in half, the trunks and their crowns exploding outward from the power behind the swing.

A vast, empty field of stumps faces Taehyung.

The leaders understand the warning because they remain in the sky, not a single one daring to take Jungkook away again.

“Jeon Jungkook must be retrieved as per the results of the vote! Today,” Byunghun shouts from where he’s held in a dragon’s palm. “We will not stand for your disobedience, Kim Taehyung!”

Taehyung drops his axe. It makes a loud thud that resounds through the area when it falls on the ground, the heavy weapon sinking into the soil.

Taehyung forsakes the uses of his seventh breath. It has exhausted him too much. Instead, he tilts his head, jaw part open where he draws lightning and fire. He blinks away the white speckles dotting his vision.

He’s about to unleash his attack when a bang blares high up.

A sonic boom.

A dragon lands by Taehyung's side before he knows it.

Elder Miseon opens her palms, and Dahee and Junhyun climb down.

Dahee surveys Taehyung, her gaze darting across the blood covering his form but also the ground where the axe had been and has now become a pool of blood. “Wh…” She shakily exhales. “What have you done, Taehyung? What have you done?!”

Taehyung is restless and on edge but he shifts to human. He’s immediately greeted by a slap when his mother reaches him. His head snaps toward her and he sees the horror and anger, the tears clouding her eyes.

“You foolish child!” Dahee *yells,* even though she never does. “You were forbidden from using your seventh breath!”

“I had no choice," Taehyung barks back. He summons his regenerative breath when the haziness grows and he continues to heal the remnants of his injuries while rejuvenating his lost blood.

“You always have a choice! You put yourself in danger and for what?!”

“They were taking Jungkook away! They chained me down like a fucking dog!” Taehyung rasps and he feels it, the chaos that wants to lash out anew. “Was I supposed to let them do as they please, Mother? Was I supposed to submit again?”

Dahee’s mouth clamps shut.

“Taehyung… My Son…" Junhyun carefully walks closer. "What has happened?”

The members of the Council land, their wary gazes not straying away from Taehyung.

“Your son has refused to obey the Council’s command,” Byunghun wheezes and clutches his side, sweat dripping down his face. “Jeon Jungkook is a due to be granted.”

“Beg your pardon?” Dahee's focus shifts away from Taehyung as she turns on her heels to face the leaders.

“The vermin can use hemomancy,” Seungwon interjects. “A forbidden arcane on top of his draconic heritage. He needs to be locked. He’s a danger to us all.”

Dahee chuckles something vicious as her eyes flash to those of her counterpart. “You will never—”

“Jeon Jungkook will stay with us,” Junhyun interrupts, curling an arm over Taehyung’s chest when Taehyung makes a move to step forward.

“A vote has been made. If you protest any further, Vanae will be removed from the Council,” Byunghun says.

“Ah, really?” Taehyung shoves his father’s arm aside. “ *Blood for blood* ,” he recklessly rasps and he does so a second time in draconian.

“Son—”

“Taehyung, please,” Woosung says, his hands raised in a placating gesture. “We can come to an arra—”

“Kim Taehyung,” Byunghun starts, “do you wish to challenge the members of the Council, effective immediately?”

“Taehyung, do n—”

“Yeah." It’ll be easy. *It’ll be so fucking easy.* “Blood for blood.”

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung’s head swivels to where Jungkook is. The latter sits up and blearily glances around. Taehyung rushes to Jungkook's side, kneeling next to him and helping him stand up. “Are you alright?”

“You—” Jungkook gawks at Taehyung, his gaze darting up and down Taehyung’s form before his hands grip onto Taehyung's arms. “What ha— You’re *drenched* in blood.”

Jungkook wavers on his feet but Taehyung steadies him with a palm on his back. Jungkook inspects his surroundings, visibly piecing together what has gone down. There’s an unfamiliar satisfaction that swells in Taehyung when Jungkook entirely ignores Byunghun and everyone else to survey Taehyung instead.

“Tell me,” Jungkook demands.

Taehyung’s mouth and nose furls around the hint of a snarl. “The Council had a vote. You for the knowledge the man with the scent gave them.”

“I see.” Jungkook's eyes drift on Byunghun and he turns to face him. “The reward is me.”

“Yes, however Taehyung has challenged the Council,” Byunghun says.

“Is this something that can be backtracked on?” Jungkook inquires.

Taehyung emits a derisive scoff. “No.” He curls his arm around Jungkook’s back when the Prince heavily leans against him, most likely still feeling the effect of the sleep potion. “It’s done. Blood for bl—”

“Taehyung,” Jungkook interjects.

Taehyung falls mute.

He can feel how volatile his emotions and feelings are, how he’s one word away from allowing his chaos to rain hell on those opposing him. However when Jungkook lifts a hand to cup Taehyung’s face, a calmness seeps within Taehyung, pacifying the storm in him.

“Breathe," Jungkook whispers. "Everything’s fine, hm?”

Taehyung wants to retort some more but he nods instead. It's worth it when Jungkook smiles at him with something Taehyung does not quite know how to name.

“I believe the Council must exert reason,” Elder Miseon says.

“We do not respond to the Elders, as it had been decided upon decades ago,” a leader says. “The Elders merely guide us.”

“You lied to us,” another seethes.

“You kept away from us the existence of a disease killing our kind.”

“What will happen to our family? Our children?”

More uproar elevates that Elder Miseon sighs at. “We had decided against sharing such knowledge for *this* exact reason. To avoid hysteria while the other Elders and I attempt to find a solution to the plague.”

“Have you?” Byunghun retorts. “How long had you intended to keep it secret? How many more of us would have had to die before we would know the cause?”

Elder Miseon’s jaw clenches. “We did what had to be done.”

“A human is more trustworthy than our Elders,” someone says and Taehyung nearly barks out a laugh.

“We were protecting you. *Our people*,” Elder Miseon says.

“Nevertheless, Amaris’ prince must come with us, as his parents have agreed upon,” Byunghun continues. “Dohyun has assured us he will be treated well.”

Jungkook cants his head to the side. “I am not yours to give away.”

“It is a trade,” Byunghun ripostes. “We are merely following your wise advice.”

Taehyung is about to throw caution out the window and finish the job when Jungkook precedes him.

“I am no dragonborn, and Amaris has yet to officially become part of the Council,” Jungkook starts. “The result of the vote does not impact me, and neither do I have to see it come to fruition. I will not be treated like an object whose ownership can be changed at your whims. Especially when, if there is an ownership to be had over me, my husband retains it, not you.”

“You have become part of the Council when you married Taehyung,” Byunghun says.

“Have I?” Jungkook wonders, peering at Woosung. “How about a vote? Since you appear to put so much allegiance in them.”

“Those agreeing to hereby elect Jungkook, representative of Amaris, as an official member of the Council, say aye,” Woosung says.

A chorus of ‘aye’ trails after the question.

Taehyung abstains from voting, enraptured by watching the chessboard drawn on the field, its pieces shifted by every word Jungkook utters.

“The majority wins," Woosung says and he sounds oddly happy about it. "Jeon Jungkook has now become a permanent member of the Council.”

Taehyung observes Jungkook.

Jungkook is smiling as he continues to speak, and Taehyung realizes then how the prey have fallen right between the viper’s maw.

An unadulterated pride swells within Taehyung. Something so *depraved* Taehyung nearly staggers beneath the hunger to watch how else Jungkook can shape and bend all to his will. Something selfish that takes Taehyung's breath away because it is *Taehyung's* husband who stands before him, cunning and smiling and O so very enthralling.

“Taehyung?” Jungkook calls.

Taehyung startles.

Jungkook meets Taehyung's stare. “Were you listening?”

“No.”

Jungkook chuckles and the curve to his lips has this shy pull to it that it sometimes takes.

“We may now proceed with the exchange,” Byunghun says. “Unless Taehyung would like to challenge us beforehand.”

Taehyung is still distracted by Jungkook, but he manages an answer in the form of a staccato that quivers in his chest.

“How about a third option,” Jungkook begins and Taehyung subdues for now “What if I propose a more valuable prize for you?”

“Which is?”

“Dohyun has given you information about the plague, one that he must have tortured from someone. I, on the other hand, can provide proper help,” Jungkook says.

“Are you out of mind?” Taehyung snaps when he realizes where this is leading to. “Viper, you—” He pauses when he notices the cold resolution in Jungkook’s eyes.

“What knowledge?” Byunghun wonders.

Raven flames flicker around Jungkook’s arms, some touching Taehyung’s skin but not burning, and his eyes turn black as tattoos mark his throat and hands. “I’m a warlock. A necromancer, more specifically,” Jungkook says. “I can speak with the dead, including dragonborns.”

It’s a daring yet judicious bet to make: taking the first step in revealing his necromancy so as to not let Seungwon and the man with the scent further manipulate the advantage they had over Jungkook and Taehyung.

But still.

It’s risky.

It’s so damn risky because the world will now know that a warlock specialized in necromancy still exists, and that he has married a chaos dragon able to manipulate hemomancy, two outlawed arcanes. Saying that a bold red target will be put on Jungkook and Taehyung’s back would be an understatement.

“Your people are dying from a disease that I may be able to help elucidate if I’m given the chance to find souls that have not been devoured by the plague yet,” Jungkook carries on.

“This is nonsense,” someone says.

“Devoured?” Another does.

“I told you this human could not be trusted!”

“Necromancy was banned and expunged! It should not be allowed to exist!”

“We suspect the plague eats dragonborns souls,” Jungkook carries on, “a knowledge I’m certain Dohyun has not graced you with.”

Taehyung glances around.

No one appears to have noticed the man with the scent’s absence up till now, or his presence that Taehyung catches in a tree far away, a partially hidden door behind the man. Yumi is next to him, the two of them crouched on a branch. Taehyung surveys him and it isn’t scary to do so because the man with the scent is busy glaring at Jungkook.

The man looks *furious*, like Taehyung has never seen him.

It terrifies Taehyung, but it also elicits joy in him. The man with the scent is the one to have been beaten for once, even if fleetingly.

“Jungkook is telling the truth,” Woosung says amidst more protests from the leaders. “He has not lied once.”

“So he *is* a necromancer?”

“He and Taehyung must be apprehended.”

“I don’t believe this shit for one second. Necromancers aren’t a thing anymore and haven’t been for centuries. He’s lying.”

“I can show you,” Jungkook shrugs. “Once I’ve proven it to you, I would like to ask for my own due, considering that you will find my help beneficial.”

“What is your due?” Byunghun snips, his ire evident.

“Dohyun. Bring him to me."

A silence settles between the two opposing groups.

Taehyung sees how the arcanic door opens behind the man with the scent.

“Considering what has occurred today, how can we be certain that you are not only a necromancer, but that you will also agree to help us?” Someone retorts.

“I don’t want my husband, his family or Vanae’s people to die,” Jungkook simply says, honest and blunt, and it works because some of the leaders’ stances unwind a bit. “Finding a cure to the plague is as important for you as it is for me.”

A murmur trails after Jungkook’s admission.

Taehyung remains silent, ready to step in the second Jungkook asks for it or shows any sign of discomfort. The leaders discuss together for a few seconds but it does not seem to please Jungkook who speaks once more.

“I would appreciate a prompt answer.”

“The Council must take a vote and ponder about this offer,” Byunghun says.

“No,” Jungkook states.

“Pardon?”

“Refuse or accept now. You’ve unfortunately exhausted Taehyung and I’s patience,” Jungkook says, who must have noticed the way Taehyung’s muscles keep tensing and relaxing. “Refuse, and I suppose the challenge happens, bringing forth the question of whether or not you can win a battle against Taehyung. Accept, and not only will you remain alive, but you will also be granted my aid.”

“Are you threatening the Council, you fucking whore?” Seungwon spits.

“Yes,” Jungkook says without missing a beat and hilarity swells in Taehyung at how startled Seungwon is who even makes an aborted motion to step back. “This whore believes that it is quite fair considering that you’ve tried to *abduct* him and then give him to the most cruel man he has ever known.”

Seungwon scowls. “You filthy w—”

“Careful,” is all that Taehyung says, but it's enough.

Seungwon’s teeth click shut.

Byunghun glowers and pivots toward Woosung’s daughter. “Dohyun, may we speak—” He pauses. “Where is he?”

“In the trees,” Jungkook says, and the dozens of gazes dart in the direction he’s looking at.

“Yumi,” the man with the scent says, Taehyung still able to hear him. Yumi trudges through the arcanic door, the lizard on her head. The man with the scent walks backward, trailing after her, a smile plastered on his lips. “Until next time, my dove and prince."

The door vanishes in a gust of wind.

A lull floats for a moment, broken by Jungkook. “Well, I believe this settles it? It seems Dohyun does not wish to have his prize anymore, meaning that the trade is now called off. So is mine.”

Byunghun has the audacity to look peeved.

“I believe so, yes,” Woosung says with a sigh that sounds relieved.

Someone talks, then another leader does, more joining soon in the animated argument, whining about danger or some bullshit like that.

Taehyung does not listen, their voices muffled, his focus narrowed on Byunghun. Even Jungkook's voice does not pierce through the dense, stormy fog that clouds Taehyung's mind.

One of Taehyung’s feet shuffles forward.

“We must still converse about—”

Byunghun does not get to finish his sentence that ends with a strangled noise when Taehyung’s fingers coil around it. Taehyung slams Byunghun right where Taehyung's pool of blood is and it splashes outward, some drops splattering across Taehyung’s face.

Byunghun struggles against the crushing grip but it only prompts Taehyung to stiffen it until barely a thread of air is delivered to the man’s lungs.

“Do not think for one *second* that I will forget what you’ve done to me today, what you’ve tried to do with Jungkook. You’ve wounded him. You betrayed us and Vanae,” Taehyung lowly rasps and he lowers his face until Byunghun’s dread suffuses Taehyung’s senses, the dragonborn’s pupil shaking as he looks up. “Blood for blood still remains, but it’s suspended until I deem it time to be uttered again. Do you understand, Byunghun?”

Byunghun nods.

Taehyung hasn't released his hold yet. He doesn’t want to, even if he should. He might kill Byunghun if he does not.

Byunghun wheezes as Taehyung's bruising constraint tightens.

It's only when a hand with a cold ring cradles Taehyung's nape that he lets go. He straightens up, Jungkook's palm sliding down between Taehyung's shoulders.

“Will you still aid us, Jungkook?" Woosung asks.

Taehyung has a half a mind to tell the man to fuck off.

“I’ll help Taehyung, his family, and by extension you,” Jungkook answers.

“How can we be certain that he’s a necromancer?” A leader says. “It was expunged centuries ago. Millenniums.”

“I have everything to gain by telling the truth. If Dohyun could be given immunity and a protective custody for the valuable information he had given you, I don’t see why I wouldn’t receive the same treatment since *I* can actively help with the plague,” Jungkook says. “I will be useful to you, if you allow it,” he says and there’s something in the way he phrases this that makes it sound like the Council is the one with the upper hand when it couldn’t be farther away from the truth.

“We must let him help us.”

"I do not trust him."

“If we take him to the pit of bones, he could perhaps speak with the dead there,” someone says.

“If it is true. For all we know he’s tricking us and Woosung’s daughter.”

“My daughter can see through tricks,” Woosung says.

“Take me to a cemetery,” Jungkook says. “I’ll be able to show you my abilities then.”

“What about Taehyung?” Someone shouts and averts his eyes. “He can use hemomancy.”

“Taehyung and Jungkook’s arcanes are too volatile to be allowed to run free without restrictions,” a leader adds.

“Especially Taehyung considering that he’s a chaos dragon,” another leader says, one that has always voiced out their acrimony for Taehyung. “He’s too unstable. He has proven it today as well. We cannot allow him to become a threat to the Council.”

“I wouldn’t have been a threat to you if you had not been one to me in the first place,” Taehyung says.

“You used your own blood to wound us. It is abnormal and *vile*,” someone says. “It mustn’t be permitted.”

“I agree,” Byunghun says, his voice rough. “Something must be done about Taehyung’s arcane. While chaos dragons have been an exemplary aid during the Great War, the very few still alive have grown to be too unpredictable and destructive. It is particularly true in Taehyung’s case now.”

“There is no need for such haste,” Woosung intervenes. “We must reconvene and speak. Together.”

“We can speak now,” Byunghun snides. “After defying the Council, Taehyung must be apprehended no matter what.”

“You can certainly try,” Taehyung and Jungkook both say in union.

“Taehyung does not oppose any danger to you,” Elder Miseon says.

“He has always cared about dragonborns and his people,” Dahee continues but it falls on deaf ears.

“Look around you!” A leader says and swipes her arm around.

“His blood is tainting the ground! The forest has been devastated! He is too volatile! Corrupted by his chaos!”

“What else can he do with his hemomancy?” Another agrees. “He represents too many erratic variables that we *cannot* afford to leave unrestrained.”

A hand grips onto Taehyung’s arm. His mother’s. She had warned Taehyung about this. She had known dragonborns would not react kindly to Taehyung’s seventh breath, that it would be a tipping point for them in how they view him.

“He could control *our* blood.”

“I can’t,” Taehyung says. “It’s only mine.”

“It does not change anything. You must be contained.”

“If Taehyung is, so will my help,” Jungkook says, and the leaders quieten.

“Your help is fucking bullshit,” Seungwon sneers. “We gain nothing and you have it all. We don’t even know if you’ll actually be useful for the plague. You’re bluffing.”

“How about another trade?” Byunghun starts. “We will discard the challenge that has been uttered today while annulling the exchange with Dohyun. We will also keep hushed Jungkook’s necromancy and Taehyung's hemomancy, all under an arcanic oath we will vow on. Finally, we will allow Taehyung to live freely, and he will not be sent to Bastille.”

“And what do you want in return?”

“Jungkook’s help with the plague, a seal over your seventh breath effectively immediately, and a vow to have four of your most destructive breaths be sealed in the future, once the plague has been elucidated,” Byunghun says.

Dahee and Junhyun immediately protest. Elder Miseon too, albeit more calmly.

Jungkook is quiet. His and Taehyung’s gaze find each other amidst the dispute around them.

“It’s a good trade,” Jungkook murmurs. *‘It doesn’t matter’,* it reads as.

“I know, it’s advantageous for us,” Taehyung answers. *‘It does not. They won’t win’.*

“Will you accept it?” *‘Everything’s fine’.*

Taehyung nods. “I accept the trade,” he says and peers at Woosung’s daughter, the black dragon stepping closer to him and Byunghun.

Dahee’s glare darts on him.

“You must understand that if you do not see through your vow, you will be sent to Bastille to await your judgment for your defiance and endangerment of the Council and Vanae’s residents, but also for your destruction of land and properties,” Byunghun warns.

“I know."

Woosung’s daughter extends a talon, the palm facing upward.

Taehyung places his hand on it, and he vows.

Byunghun does too, Seungwon as well, then the rest of the leaders join after a brief discussion. Dahee and Junhyun are next. Jungkook is last to speak and touch the black dragon’s palm, walking back to Taehyung’s side once done.

Taehyung’s arm is heavy with a raven, thin band wraps around his right wrist. He shuffles through his breath and he tries to summon his seventh one.

Nothing happens, as expected.

The skin of Woosung’s daughter shimmers. A bubble of black matter rises out of her palm and it flickers with images of the vows that have been taken. She closes her talon around it and moves to stand behind her father.

“The vows have been heard and collected by my daughter,” Woosung says. “If one of us does not stay true to the oath they have taken today, my daughter will be notified, and sanctions will be given.”

Taehyung’s gaze drags across the members of the Council, the same one that have betrayed him today, out of fear and ignorance.

It’s a game of pretense.

Taehyung has vowed, and he will break them some day. He knows this. Byunghun too. Everyone does. The Council will certainly look for a new way to subdue him in the meantime.

It feels as though several ticking bombs are about to implode: the plague’s next pulse, the man with the scent's looming threat, Kaiya’s mourning, Seohyung and Sungmin’s schemes.

New ones have been added now: two swords of Damocles.

One dangling above Taehyung’s head because his peers, *the Council*, fear him so much they’ll try everything in their power to contain him in Bastille, as they've been wanting to for years.

A second sword sways above Jungkook’s crown, the Prince of Amaris who manipulates an arcane that goes against life itself. Thankfully, the Council will protect Jungkook for now. They will value his aid with the plague over their own pride and dread.

Revealing Jungkook's necromancy may have been reckless, perhaps even foolish, however it temporizes Taehyung and Jungkook's swords, keeping them suspended in time.

Jungkook would call it a silver lining.

“I’d like to see Jungkook’s abilities,” a leader says, the others agreeing.

“We can fly to a cemetery, and you will see, then,” Jungkook says.

“There is one close by, I believe,” Woosung nods. “Let us relocate there.”

Jungkook turns toward Taehyung, holding onto his arm as he peers at him. “Fly me?”

This is not how Taehyung had expected for the day to elapse.

The group had flown to a cemetery where Jungkook had thankfully found a soul there that everyone had been able to see and hear, and then witness the passing of. The Council members had then flown back to their respective land, while Taehyung and Jungkook’s families had traveled to Dahee and Junhyun’s house to discuss, the afternoon having blended into evening.

Taehyung doesn’t like any of this.

He especially did not like the *gazes* the Council members had settled on Jungkook, full of selfish wonder, greed and also alarm.

It had not flown over the dragonborns leaders’ heads how intricate Jungkook’s arcane is, how useful it may be for the plague but also for their own gain. Dragonborns abhor forbidden arcanes in view of how often they have been used against them during the Great War, however even the Council would not deny the advantages that having Jungkook on their side can bring.

Jungkook had hushed Taehyung’s worries, saying that his arcane was bound to be revealed, and that they’ll find a solution for the vow they have sworn upon.

Taehyung doesn’t care about his seventh breath being sealed, but refuses to have four more being taken from him. He will have to challenge the Council, eventually. Part of him looks forward to it. His arcane is ravenous for more.

But it can wait.

Taehyung *can* be patient.

There’s something more important right now anyway.

“Dear God,” Jungkook sighs and plops down on the armrest of a chair. Revna, whose necklace they had retrieved earlier, is curled around his neck, sniffing the air.

“What a clusterfuck,” Jimin says. “What a fucking clusterfuck.”

“So now the Council knows about Jungkook’s arcane *and* Taehyung’s seventh breath,” Namjoon summarizes. “They know two technically expunged arcanes still exist.”

“This has to be one of the worst case scenarios possible,” Seokjin says.

“It’s not,” Jungkook counters. “I mean, Taehyung *is* in a bad spot, but I'm not. The Council needs me alive. My demonstration was convincing at the cemetery. A few members of the Council asked for my help regarding personal issues with members of their families that have died.”

“Oh. That is good,” Junhyun notes. “I had not thought of this.”

“They may not like me, but necromancy being expunged works in our favor since there are problems only I can solve. My arcane is rare, and rare things are coveted.”

“How can you be so— So nonchalant, Jungkook,” Dahee says, pacing back and forth. “You and Taehyung are in danger. We were forced to vow.”

“Vows can be broken.”

“At the cost of my son being sent to Bastille. Dragonborns held captive there *never* leave. It is not your regular prison,” Dahee snips. “It’s one where people are sent to die.”

“Taehyung should have thought of that before defying the Council like a deranged idiot,” Jimin chirps.

Taehyung zaps Jimin. “The fuck was I supposed to do when they were about to abduct the Viper?”

“Wait for us?” Jimin proposes.

“Boring,” Taehyung mutters. Plus he had been too mad to think reasonably.

“Taehyung is fine. *We* are. We're capitalizing on their fear," Jungkook says. "They won't dare to lose someone who may aid them against a plague killing their kind, and they know damn well I'll withdraw my help if they send Taehyung to Bastille."

“I will also intervene if the vows are broken by the Council, or *when* either you will break them,” Elder Miseon says with a pointed look at Taehyung. “I know Elder Maya will also aid you.”

“The Elders are not meant to meddle with matters like those,” Junhyun comments.

“Have you ever known me to follow rules?” Elder Miseon chuckles. “We will not let anything happen to you both,” she says to Taehyung and Jungkook then peers at Taehyung. “Especially you, my child.”

Dahee sits down next to her mate, gnawing on the nail of her thumb as she blankly stares at the floor.

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” Taehyung says.

Her gaze sharpens when it drifts on him. “We will fight the Council if we have to. Elders know with you here it will be easy to end their miserable, worthless life."

“Darling,” Junhyun frowns. “We can't simply kill them. We’d be at war against dozens of nations.”

Dahee clicks her tongue and waves him off. “Let your mate fantasize for a moment, will you?”

“Sooo,” Hoseok trails off, glancing at Taehyung. “You can manipulate hemomancy?”

“Hadn’t used it in fifteen years, more or less,” Taehyung says. “All I can do is harden my blood though.”

“That’s crazy.”

“And useless. I couldn’t use it since I knew it’d get me killed or thrown to Bastille. Plus the only way I can use that breath is by wounding myself, so it’s useless *and* damaging to me.”

“Could you have used this breath while you were with Dohyun?”

“To do what?” Taehyung says. “The cuffs were sealing all of my breaths except for the healing one. My seventh breath is fucking worthless. It puts me in danger more than anything else if today isn’t testimony enough.”

“Right,” Yoongi says, contrite. “Sorry.”

“It’s perhaps your most powerful breath when combined with your healing one,” Jungkook says and surveys Taehyung. “You can heal any wound and regrow limbs, meaning that you have an unlimited supply of blood. Of weapons. The more wounded you are, the more powerful you become. It echoes a lot with my arcane, where the more people die, the more weapons I have.” Jungkook draws a cheeky smile, and Taehyung already knows what the Prince is about to say. “Silver lining.”

“You’re fucking insane,” Taehyung says but he can’t quell down the amusement that rises in him.

“And you tore yourself apart to fight two dozen dragons. Who is the most insane between us two?”

Taehyung concedes that point to the Prince. “Whatever, Viper,” he says and Jungkook chuckles.

“If I may,” Namjoon says and raises a hand like a damn kid in a class. “We now have Seohyung, Sungmin, Dohyun, Seungwon *and* the Council against us? Should we just… Elope? Run away? Live somewhere far far away?”

“The Council isn’t an enemy yet, as for my parents, they’re unimportant, although I’m curious of what discussion they've with Dohyun,” Jungkook mulls over.

“Your parents know about the stone,” Yoongi says. “They must know about the plague as well since Dohyun does. This somewhat confirms the theory that the stone and the plague are linked.”

“I was thinking the same,” Junhyun says. “We must find the stone before anyone else does.”

“I haven't heard anything about it,” Elder Miseon says. “I will investigate as well and aid you as much as I can.”

“Finding this tiny stone is like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Hoseok mutters. “I’ve been inquiring underground as well but found nothing at all. Same for Hyuna, she asked around too.”

“We should visit Amaris and Kaiya,” Taehyung says.

“Oh, Woosung has told you about it,” Elder Miseon says. “I believe the death of Kaiya’s guardian is related to the plague. Perhaps their soul is still in the forest, one you could ask questions to. The guardians are ancient and knowledgeable.”

“We should research about Aurora’s history as well,” Junhyun proposes. “We may find useful information, whether about Kaiya, the plague or the stone.”

“Amaris has an extensive library,” Namjoon says then peers at Jungkook. “You wanted to visit the city again, now is a good time.”

“Would be a good idea. You should bring the books here too,” Hoseok says. “Nine heads are better than one or two.”

“True,” Seokjin agrees with a nod. “Although yours only counts as half.”

“Fuck you,” Hoseok says and punches Seokjin’s leg.

“If that will be all, I will take my leave,” Elder Miseon smiles and stands to make her way toward the exit door. “The remainder of the Elders must be warned about what has occurred today."

Taehyung opens the door for the Elder. “Thank you,” he quietly says.

“You should be thanking yourself and your delightful husband,” Elder Miseon chuckles. “Plus you know that I nurture a soft spot for you since you’ve been sneezing fire when you were a toddler.”

Taehyung’s cheeks heat up. “Whatever…"

“Petulant child,” Elder Miseon and Dahee both say together. “Have a good night, everyone,” Miseon finishes. She steps outside and after shifting to her dragon self, she disappears with a sonic boom.

“Are you well, Jungkook?” Junhyun worries.

“I’m fine,” Jungkook nods.

“You don’t feel anything out of the ordinary?” Taehyung presses.

Jungkook shakes his head. “I don’t.”

Taehyung internally heaves a sigh, a weight that had been churning in his chest lifting. “Tell me if you feel strange or sick at some point.”

“I will, but honestly, it was one of the best sleep I've had,” Jungkook smiles. “Those vials work like a wonder.”

“Because Yoongi is quite wonderful,” Jimin teases.

“Not as much as you are,” Yoongi counters.

Jimin, to Taehyung’s shock, fucking *blushes* . Jimin does not blush. He’s the one who teases and flirts and prompts other people to stammer or duck their head down. Yet here Jimin’s cheeks take a pink tinge that travels down his neck.

Taehyung is about to make a remark about it, uttering an annoying *'Well, well, well'* with a shit-eating grin when Dahee speaks up.

"This fucking Council," Dahee spits. "Never liked most of the members and how judgmental they've always been of Taehyung as if he's some sort of manic, ticking time bomb. They even forced him to use his seventh breath because of how frenzied *they* have been."

"It was my fault, Mom." Taehyung meets his mother's gaze. "I was holding back, and that's how I got trapped on the ground."

"They shouldn't have trapped you to begin with. They've used those barbarian subduing contraptions on one of their own."

"There is no use in mulling further about what should have not been done, Darling," Junhyun says and kisses the side of Dahee's head, his palm rubbing up and down her spine. "We will work together to solve everything. One matter at a time."

"We should sleep," Yoongi yawns.

"You should clean up," Jungkook says to Taehyung and walks toward him, his gaze darting up and down Taehyung's bloody form. "Can we go to our house?"

Before Taehyung can answer, arms wrap around him while a chin tucks against his shoulder. He hugs back his mother who does not seem to care about the dry blood covering him.

"I'm sorry," the both of them say.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Dahee says and breaks the embrace.

"You always forbade me from using my seventh breath. For good reasons, clearly. I should have—I should have listened."

"It was bound to happen one day. You are a chaos dragon, my son, there is only so much self-control you can exert over yourself," Dahee says and it sounds teasing at first, but there is a hint of seriousness in her words. "I'm sorry," she says and cups Taehyung's cheek, the one her hand had come down on. "For this, and for yelling at you."

"You're forgiven," Taehyung chuckles and brings her into a tight embrace.

"She *yelled?* " Jimin squeaks.

"It was quite terrifying, Son," Junhyun frowns, peering at Jimin. "I would have much appreciated your presence at the time."

"I'm so glad we weren't here," Hoseok winces. "Angry Dahee is frightening."

Everyone in the room promptly agrees.

Dahee jerks away from Taehyung, her face red and knitted in an embarrassed glower. "Stop treating me like I am some kind of demon."

All eyes settle on her, not a single word spoken for a few seconds, yet so much is being said.

“I see.” Dahee glances at Junhyun. “ *I see,* ” she repeats with a jut of her chin before making her way toward the stairs.

“My darling,” Junhyun starts but Dahee shrugs him off. “Listen.”

“No, you’re grounded."

“You are as intimidating as you are beautiful when furious,” Junhyun says.

“You have barely seen furious, Darling,” Dahee says with a curl of her lips. Junhyun pauses with a quiet *‘Oh’* and he’s dragged upstairs, trailing after his mate.

“Yeah, so.”

“Time to go. Right now.”

“Yup, yup. I’m not sleeping here tonight,” Jimin grimaces.

“Hurry up, children, as more children are being made upstairs,” Hoseok jests.

Taehyung and Jimin make gagging noises, the two of them walking out the door, the rest of the group following suit.

“Can I crash at yours?” Jimin asks Yoongi and Namjoon. “It’s closer than mine and I'm too lazy to fly.”

“Sure,” Yoongi says. “You’re fine with it, Joon?”

“Of course,” Namjoon smiles. “You’re welcome any time, Jimin.”

“Let’s go then,” Jimin says, walking away with Yoongi and Namjoon. “Bye lovebirds!”

Taehyung peers over his shoulder to flip Jimin off. He shoves his hands in his pants pocket but he rapidly retracts them when they’re met with half dry, half wet blood that must have seeped through his pants.

“So,” Jungkook says. “Hemomancy?” He asks and Taehyung hums. “I’m not sure how to explain, but this arcane fits you.”

“Uh?”

“It’s a defensive arcane, technically, but you turn it into something offensive. It’s you.”

“I suppose.”

“I didn’t have to guess it,” Jungkook snickers and loops an arm around Taehyung’s, allowing Revna to half drape over his and Taehyung’s shoulders.

“Yeah because you were being abducted while I was chained like a damn pig. There’s nothing funny.”

“Would you rather I cry about it?” Jungkook retorts and Taehyung huffs. “Is solidifying your blood the only thing you can do with it, by the way?”

“As far as I know, yeah,” Taehyung answers. He never got the chance to experiment with this breath.

“That’s so cool.”

“Of course you’d find that kinda stuff cool.”

“You’re knowing me better and better every day that passes, husband of mine. I’m very flattered,” Jungkook obnoxiously croons.

Taehyung would usually respond with a crude dismissal, however he opts for an honest admission for once. “I do,” he says, peering ahead, but he still feels Jungkook’s gaze on him. “You’re sure you’re feeling fine? You weren’t lying?”

“I wasn’t lying, I promise,” Jungkook says. “I’m fine, and if not, I’ll tell you.”

“You do that.”

The two of them trek through the forest and toward their house in companionable silence.

Their garden is ruined when they arrive there, destroyed by the aftermath of the fight, a problem that Tonight Taehyung delegates for Tomorrow Taehyung.

They step inside their house that is thankfully intact.

Taehyung locks the entrance door no matter how pointless it is if a thunder is to attack them, but it adds a layer of security that partially alleviates Taehyung’s unease.

“Can I clean your wounds?” Jungkook blurts out moments later.

Taehyung pauses at the staircase.

He twists his head to peer at Jungkook. “I don’t have any. They’re healed.”

“Oh. Okay. Never mind.” Jungkook’s back is too Taehyung as he lights up the fireplace.

Taehyung catches onto the slump of Jungkook’s shoulders. The curiosity is rekindled within him. It has never really disappeared since the night of a few days ago, but it had been doused by today’s events.

“I do have a lot of blood on me.”

Jungkook turns around, his gaze finding Taehyung’s. “Can I clean it?”

Taehyung finds himself sitting crossed legs on the carpet of his living room ten minutes later. He’s reclined against the sofa; the fireplace, a lit lantern and a few candles casting a dim, golden hue in the area.

He has cleaned the lower part of his body already, along with his hair and face, however he has left his chest untouched and naked, only wearing some sweatpants. It had been strange to shower like this, purposefully avoiding his chest, but the oddity of it all had been lessened by his curiosity that he does not question much.

Jungkook has changed as well into a new set of pajamas and he seems alert — or rather excited, somehow? — as he brings two wooden basins of warm water along with a pair of washcloths, settling everything on the ground after pushing the coffee table aside. He grabs a pillow that he settles next to Taehyung, plopping himself down.

“I’ll start with the right side, okay?”

Taehyung hums in agreement.

Jungkook grabs a washcloth that he dips in one of the large bowls of water. Then, with a slow hold, he takes Taehyung’s wrist to place it on his lap and begins to swipe the cloth on the skin, removing the remnants of blood from the fingers little by little. Jungkook is gentle, his touch careful and measured, as if worried of hurting Taehyung.

Or perhaps Jungkook wants to take, if he enjoys doing this, for some reasons.

“Why do you want to do this?”

Legs folded under him and head lowered, Jungkook mumbles, coy. “I don’t know, actually,."

“How so?”

“It’s just…” Jungkook trails off for a moment when he reaches a spot where the blood stubbornly stays in-between Taehyung’s fingers. “If it was me, I’d like to have my wounds cleaned by someone else.”

“I don’t have any wounds,” Taehyung says, and he doesn’t want to make it seem as though he’s contesting what Jungkook says, but he's lost and wants to understand.

“I know.”

“So, what, you’d like to be cleaned?” Taehyung teases and it does not miss its target.

“I—I did not say that."

“So that’s a yes.” Taehyung's conclusion is met with a smack of the wet washcloth on his arm.

“Shut up.”

Jungkook looks down, the tip of his ears red, and Taehyung’s mouth twitches upward.

An instance of silence stretches between them.

Jungkook’s task guides him higher up Taehyung’s arm, soon done with the hand, then the wrist and the forearm where the blood is the most present aside from on the chest. The warm water feels nice, relaxing Taehyung’s muscles and the lingering ache in them.

Taehyung watches Jungkook’s movements, the way the fingers dip in the water to clean the blood from the washcloth. Jungkook’s bang dangles over his forehead, slightly swaying when he turns his head, and he stops every now and then to tuck it behind his ear but the strands aren’t long enough.

“Yes..."

Taehyung blinks a few times, confused by Jungkook's sudden admission. It takes him a few seconds to comprehend which question the answer is for. "Why?"

“Because it would mean someone is taking care of me.” One of Jungkook's hands curls around Taehyung’s bicep, the other dragging the washcloth over the trace of dirt and blood there. “I know it's childish. I’m a grown man who can very well clean himself on his own.”

“I don’t think it’s childish.”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t."

“Then… Is it nice?”

Taehyung thinks about the skin of Jungkook’s fingers on his arm, on how it does not feel so alien anymore. The washcloth is soft, albeit not as much as Jungkook’s fingers, but it lightly grazes over the few scratches left that Taehyung has not bothered healing up.

“It is,” Taehyung confesses.

Taehyung’s gaze catches Jungkook’s, however not for long because Jungkook ducks his head with a smile.

Jungkook rinses the washcloth before squeezing out the excess water. Taehyung expects Jungkook to carry on with his task, however Jungkook lowers his hands on his lap. The one that is not holding the cloth lifts, inching toward Taehyung’s naked chest and the fingertips bumps against the skin there.

Jungkook seems curious too, and so Taehyung does not push him away.

Jungkook trails his fingers down Taehyung’s chest, right above the smear of dried blood that does not bother the necromancer, and his pace is slow as he brushes over the aftermath of when Taehyung had carved his own flesh.

The fingertips sprawl over the faint shadows on Taehyung’s navel where four parallel and carmine lines are smudged. They stay there for a moment, dragging left and right as the thumb kneads at an unblemished patch of skin. Then they skid to Taehyung’s left side, right above the curve of his waist, and Taehyung’s muscles constrict when goosebumps erupt on his skin.

Taehyung never knew his side had a sensitive spot there, that *he* had one to begin with.

Jungkook must find the unearthed knowledge interesting because his nails graze at the ribs, and Taehyung reacts the same way. It’s odd because it doesn’t feel ticklish, per se, just… sensitive, where Taehyung isn't unsure on whether he wants to jerk away from the touch or lean into it.

Jungkook's own skin pebbles, almost as if Taehyung's shiver has walked a soft path up Jungkook's skin. Jungkook withdraws with a chuckle, resuming the cleanse of Taehyung's blood.

Taehyung can't really tell how much has passed and is still elapsing.

Maybe ten minutes have passed or more.

The washcloth is passed over Taehyung's side, at the same spot Jungkook's fingers had grazed, and this time no goosebumps flare on Taehyung's skin.

It's odd.

"This is really nice," Jungkook says, his timber a little raspy.

Taehyung emits a hummed sound of agreement. "Do you count this as taking care of someone?"

"Yes."

"Do you prefer taking care of someone or being taken care of?"

"The former."

It's a lie.

Taehyung can read through the tale.

"Lying to me?"

Jungkook huffs a puff of air. His lips pinch into a thin line. He rinses the washcloth in the second basin and he averts his gaze when he nods.

"Don't."

"Lying can be easier than telling the truth."

"Then if you can't tell the truth, just say so," Taehyung says.

Jungkook glances at Taehyung. "I will, but you have to do the same too."

"I will."

Jungkook smiles with a tilt of his head and the word 'soft' flashes in Taehyung's mind anew. Jungkook casts his eyes down. He cups the side of Taehyung's hip with a hand as he continues to clean Taehyung's chest with the other, not much blood left on the skin.

"Why did you lie?"

"I don't like admitting that—" The motions of Jungkook's hands pause. "I don't like speaking out my greed."

"Wanting to be taken care of doesn't make you greedy," Taehyung says.

"It is greedy because if it happens, I'll want more of it. And more, and more, and if it's not given to me anymore… It'll make me crave something that had once been given to me but then taken away.

And the greed will be worse."

"It's more than alright to be greedy for such things."

Jungkook silently washes the last remnant of blood on Taehyung's navel before saying "I don't know about that, Taehyung."

"Are you hungry?"

Jungkook's face furrows and Taehyung can't tell if the Prince is angry, sad, hopeful, or perhaps everything at once.

Jungkook nods either way and Taehyung says "What are you hungry for?"

"Bread," Jungkook answers after a beat.

"What kind?"

Taehyung and Jungkook both fall mute when the latter does not respond.

Jungkook rises on his feet at some point to rinse one of the basins and come back with clean water. When he sits down on the pillow again, he does so on Taehyung's left side this time to finish cleaning Taehyung's chest for the next few minutes.

Reclined against the foot of the couch, Taehyung distractedly watches the crackling embers of the fireplace. The fire has quelled down, the lantern on the coffee table and the candles peppering the living room being the main source of light.

"This kind," Jungkook whispers as the washcloth drifts over Taehyung's shoulder.

The two of them have been lowly talking since they've settled down in the living room, however their voices grow even quieter now, their words hushed, as if confessing some secrets only for the other to hear.

"Have you ever had this kind before?"

Jungkook shakes his head, his hair hiding his eyes.

"Do you want to try it?"

Jungkook's head darts up, his and Taehyung's gaze locking together. "Uh?"

"Do you want to try?" Taehyung repeats with a little more assurance.

Jungkook looks taken aback, so much so that he reels away from Taehyung as he yanks his hands toward himself. Taehyung can nearly *see* Jungkook's greed, the latter so vivid and alive that it veils Jungkook's eyes and looms over his form.

Jungkook's hands ball up into fists. "I don't know."

"Why?"

"I don't know…"

Taehyung notices the swelling upset that takes over Jungkook, and so he discards the subject. “Want to finish cleaning my left arm?”

“Yes, please."

Jungkook resumes his ministration.

Taehyung is a little tired, half due to the turmoil that has occurred this afternoon, half because the cleaning is surprisingly calming. Jungkook looks sleepy too, his lashes slowly fluttering and dusting faded shadows over his cheeks.

The minutes trickle away.

The blood is washed away by now.

Jungkook is even slower. Taehyung doesn’t want to assume, but it’s as though Jungkook doesn’t want this moment to end too soon.

It does anyway.

Jungkook leaves the washcloth in a wooden bowl. He makes a move to stand but Taehyung speaks.

“Do you want to try?”

Jungkook wipes his hands on a towel. He drops them on his lap, his fingers gripping at the towel. His eyes meet Taehyung’s. “If you’ll only give it to me once and never again, then no, I don’t.”

“I—” Taehyung trails off for a moment. “I don’t know if I’ll give it again,” he says, opting to be honest. “I’ll try, but…”

“Why do you want to give it to me?”

“I’m curious.”

“About what?”

“You."

To Taehyung's surprise, Jungkook glares at him.

“Is this some kind of game for you?”

"What? No, it’s not. I wouldn’t— I’m not like that, for fuck’s sake.”

“Then why are you curious about me?”

“I don’t know, Viper. I just am."

“Have you ever been curious like this about someone else?”

“Never.” And this is why it’s so damn odd because Taehyung can’t figure out for the life of him what it is about Jungkook that is so different.

Jungkook's frown smooths. “I’m the first?”

Taehyung nods, unsure on what else to say.

Jungkook fidgets with the towel, rumpling and smoothing it out. “You’re the first that ever wants to give me bread.”

Taehyung leans forward, angling his head enough to lock onto Jungkook’s evading gaze. “It’s not very polite to refuse, don't you think?” He playfully says with a quirk of his brow.

Jungkook's mouth tugs upward. “I guess...”

“Will you accept it?”

Jungkook glances at the fireplace, then at the towel and the basins before it finally stops on Taehyung. He nods, timid and uncertain. “Okay,” Jungkook says, so mute that Taehyung can barely hear it. “I don’t know how… I don’t know how to accept it.”

“You don’t have to do anything.” Taehyung shuffles to sit in front of Jungkook, the two of them facing one another. “Can I take your hand?”

Jungkook extends it toward Taehyung. “Why—”

Taehyung grabs Jungkook’s wrist, and he hits another wall he has built himself. Again. Because raving his mouth until he smacks against cement is a running theme when it comes to handling Jungkook. Taehyung tears this wall down, however. He thinks about how he has held Jimin’s hand before, even if it is different here with Jungkook. But the gesture is the same.

Is it, though?

Taehyung isn’t sure of anything at the moment but he follows his instincts and smothers his confusion.

He plunges a hand in the basin’s water that he promptly warms up, then he takes the washcloth laying limply at the bottom that he squeezes the water off.

“I’m clean?” Jungkook says, bewildered.

“I know.”

Taehyung brings Jungkook’s hand closer to him, then with a motion slow enough to allow Jungkook to withdraw if he wishes to, Taehyung wipes a corner of the washcloth over a knuckle.

Jungkook is staring at their hands. His eyes have the same openness in them that they have adorned a few times, and it’s easy for Taehyung to see how fascinated Jungkook is, as if the latter’s mind is wrestling to wrap around the reality of what is occurring.

Taehyung traces the imaginary patterns of Jungkook's tattoos as he slides the washcloth on a finger, then on the one next to it where the wedding ring is, the storm oscillating in the diamond. The pinky and thumb are last, the fingers loose and pliant to Taehyung’s touches.

Taehyung turns Jungkook’s hand so that the palm faces upward, and he focuses his attention on the wrinkles there, tracing them with the cloth that he keeps warm with the breath heating up his body. The goosebumps are incessant in Jungkook, coming in tides that flow down Jungkook’s arm and dot his skin. Jungkook’s fingers twitch when Taehyung brushes on a spot at the base of the wrist.

Taehyung hadn't anticipated how soothing this would be.

He's lost in the quietude of his own mind as he continues to swipe the washcloth on the inner side of Jungkook’s hand, never venturing farther than the palm. A motion catches his attention, something that drops on Jungkook’s lap. Taehyung peers up.

Tears are sliding down Jungkook’s cheeks, mute as they always are.

Taehyung immediately stops. “Are you alright?”

Jungkook nods, some tears clinging onto his lashes.

“Do you want me to stop?”

A flash of alarm shrouds Jungkook’s face and he scrambles to grip Taehyung’s wrist with his free hand. “No, please. Don’t.”

“I won’t. I won't, yeah?”

“Thank you,” Jungkook rasps.

Taehyung resumes the drag of the washcloth on the inner part of Jungkook’s fingers, washing away nonexistent dust.

“This feels really nice,” Jungkook whispers but it comes out as a strained whine.

“Yeah?”

Jungkook hums, and Taehyung makes no mention of how choked it sounds. “No one— No one touched me like this... Ever.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Yes,” Jungkook says and he raises an arm to wipe his eyes.

The tug, whose origin is still unknown to Taehyung, is pulled on, churning within him.

Taehyung does not provide affection, but he may want to learn with Jungkook.

Jungkook slumps against the couch, his side pressed to it. He folds an arm over the seat and he rests his head above it, his gaze not straying away from his and Taehyung’s hands.

“Is this really okay?”

“If I didn’t want to do this, I wouldn’t have proposed. Giving it to you isn’t a bother,” Taehyung says and realizes at once.

Jungkook bobs his head and he moves his arm to bury his face in the crook of his elbow to hide his cries no matter how fruitless it is. Tears still slide down the bridge of his nose and temple, disappearing in his hair. “I don’t know what to do…"

“About what?”

“This. Do I have— What do I have to do in return?”

“Nothing.” Taehyung peers at Jungkook, waiting for the latter to look back before continuing. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Oh. Okay… S’greedy.”

“It isn’t, but even if it is, then what?”

“Being greedy is bad,” Jungkook says but it sounds more like he's repeating someone else's words.

“If there’s someone who can and should be greedy, it’s you. There’s nothing wrong with being like this, alright?”

“I was always told it’s bad.”

“Yes, and by who?”

“Seohyung.”

“Exactly. The woman who—” Taehyung stops but he carries on in spite of how blunt he’ll be. “The woman who abused you for years told you this. Her words don't hold any truth at all.”

“I’m struggling to understand this,” Jungkook confesses, his words slurring together.

“I know,” Taehyung says and this time *he* is the one who sounds soft. “You will one day. You’re not alone anymore, and you’ve got plenty of people who will tell you the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That being whoever you want to be is alright, even if it's greedy. That you aren’t a burden.”

Taehyung says nothing else as Jungkook silently cries.

Instead, he kneads at the bone of Jungkook’s wrist while he brushes the washcloth on the palm. Jungkook's thumb curls over Taehyung’s pinky.

When Taehyung glances at Jungkook an hour or perhaps more later, Jungkook is asleep, his eyes puffy and breathing slow.

Taehyung gently rests Jungkook’s hand on his lap, then he stands. He tidies everything, careful to make noise and wake up Jungkook. Once done, Taehyung ponders for a moment as he watches the sleeping prince.

He eventually comes to a decision.

After tugging down the blankets on the right side of his bed, Taehyung makes his way to the living room again. He crouches to lift Jungkook off the floor and carry him upstairs. Taehyung enters his own bedroom and he lays Jungkook on the bed. He pulls the blankets over Jungkook who turns on his side with a content sound.

Taehyung doesn't head to bed yet. He patrols the area around the house in his dragon self, and it's only once he deems it safe that he returns to the balcony where he lands. He walks inside his bedroom, then he shuffles under the covers and bed sheets.

He’s facing Jungkook, the moonlight lightening the Prince’s face.

Taehyung stares, his lids slowly falling shut.

"Taehyung?”

“What?” Taehyung says from the kitchen, preparing lunch.

“Can I go inside your bedroom? I think I forgot something in it.”

“Sure.”

Jungkook trudges up the stairs and steps through the opened door of Taehyung’s bedroom. He checks the nightstand, around and under it, then he sifts through the bed but still finds naught. He huffs, his temper flaring up. “Where is it?” He mutters to himself.

He goes inside the bathroom next. His gaze darts around then pauses on the sink.

There’s a wooden comb on the counter.

It’s not his usual one, and neither is it the one Taehyung uses. Jungkook takes it. His thumb rubs over the polished teeth. He examines one side then the other, and he freezes when he surveys the handle.

Oh.

A snake is engraved on the wood, two carmine jewels serving as the eyes.

Jungkook delicately places the comb on the counter.

He walks downstairs.

Taehyung is in the garden, crouched and discussing with Revna. Jungkook lifts the lid of the trash can and with a wince, he shuffles through its content. He does not have to search for long before his fingers knock against a solid object. Jungkook takes it out. It's his tattered comb, the one he had complained about a few nights ago.

Jungkook rushes back to the bathroom. He grabs his new comb and there isn’t a single doubt in his mind that it is his.

Taehyung has made this for Jungkook.

Jungkook never asked. If anything, he had planned to buy a new one when he'd visit Vanae's market with Jimin.

Jungkook’s greed claws at his chest in an itch, the most intense it has ever been. He lifts the comb to press the handle against his mouth, feeling the edges of the serpent with his lips. His face is red when. he looks at himself in the mirror.

A passes the comb through his tousled locks with trembling hands, eyes burning and misty.

It’s nice. *So nice* . And Jungkook imagines for a second that it’s Taehyung’s fingers carding through the strands instead.

Jungkook wonders if Taehyung would comb his hair if Jungkook asks.

A strangled noise rises in Jungkook’s throat at the erratic thought. He smacks his hands over his flaming face. Jungkook does not think he'd survive Taehyung combing his hair. He’d probably feel weird again like he had when Taehyung had been touching his nape that one night.

Should he thank Taehyung? People thank others for things like those, right?

Jungkook spends longer preparing himself this morning, dressing up prettily and forgoing on the perfume. If he spends extra time on his hair to make sure it looks especially good, no one has to know.

Taehyung is back in the kitchen when Jungkook comes down.

Jungkook walks up to him, stopping close enough for their shoulders to bump together. “This smells good,” he says and peers at the food Taehyung flips in a pan. Jungkook fidgets with the sleeves of his top, and after some more hesitation he says “Thank you.”

“For the food?”

“For the comb,” Jungkook clarifies and lifts a hand to speak against his palm, warmth travelling up his face.

“It’s nothing.”

“It isn’t for me,” Jungkook retorts, who isn’t used to anyone paying attention, let alone caring about what he says.

Taehyung huffs in response but doesn’t utter more.

“Do you know a good hairstylist in Vanae?”

“There’s one in a village three hours away. Why?”

“I have to cut my hair, they’ve gotten too long.”

“Do you want to cut them?”

Jungkook’s brain stutters at the question. Seohyung always forced him to keep his hair short. However he does like how they are right now, how they’re slowly reaching past his ears and brushing past his brows. He thinks he’d like them to be a bit longer, even. “I don’t want to cut them.”

“Then don’t,” Taehyung simply says.

Jungkook plays with his wedding ring, admiring the storm in it that sometimes adorns a faint carmine hue. “We’re going to Amaris soon though.”

“And?”

“And she’ll be there. She’ll say something about my hair.”

“Namjoon and Yoongi will be there. Me too. The offer to snap her neck still stands.”

Jungkook’s growing upset lessens at the playful yet serious lilt in Taehyung’s voice. “I should cut my hair.”

“You’re free, Viper. So what do you want to do?”

Freedom still feels like an unfamiliar concept to Jungkook, however not as unattainable as before. Perhaps he can start little by little, first by not cutting his hair and letting them grow out. “I won’t cut my hair,” Jungkook quietly says and surveys Taehyung.

Taehyung peers back at him. A small, nearly unnoticeable smile floats on his lips. “Good.”

Jungkook worries his lower lip between his teeth but it does nothing to hide the happiness that must paint his face. “I’ll have to buy new hair clips if I grow my hair because they’ll get in the way when I’ll work.”

“Before you do this, check the drawer of the bathroom's sink.”

“What?”

“Check it.”

Jungkook runs to the bathroom and yanks the drawer open. He finds two hair clips in it, shaped like a snake and made of wood.

Taehyung keeps feeding Jungkook with more and more loaves, even some Jungkook had never known the recipe of. It sustains Jungkook's greed in a way he never knew was possible. It isn’t satiated, but it is properly eating for the first time.

Jungkook slides down the wall, the hair clips held in his hands, a new motivation to grow his hair. A comfort and reassurance.

He stays there for a moment, twisting the gifts this and that way, giggling to himself then hiding his face in embarrassment at how ridiculously he’s behaving over a man. Over a giving, patient, tender man. *His husband.* The same one who begins to smile more at Jungkook and look at him with an unwavering attention that Jungkook both shies away from yet relishes in.

After tucking one of the hair clips in the drawer and keeping the other with himself, Jungkook pads toward the kitchen.

Namjoon, Yoongi and Jimin are here. Taehyung is grumbling about not being a maid as he makes an additional serving of food for the newcomers. Jungkook settles at the kitchen counter and sits down next to Jimin.

“Taehyung made that for you,” Jimin says with a nod toward the gift Jungkook is playing with.

“I know,” Jungkook mumbles through a grin, fiddling with the snake hair clip.

“He only carves for selected people, you know.”

“Who?”

“His family, his friends. His husband,” Jimin adds with a wink.

Jungkook’s cheeks heat up and he ducks his head to conceal the stupid smile stretching his lips. “I can’t wear it yet because my hair isn’t long enough.”

“Grow them out and you’ll be able to then,” Taehyung says.

Jungkook startles, only noticing now that Taehyung had been in front of him and serving him a full plate. “I think I will.”

“You should,” Taehyung says and serves Jimin next.

“After all,” Jimin loudly starts, “Taehyung carved those hair clips for his lovely husband for a reason, didn’t he?”

“Shut up,” Taehyung snips and Jungkook mumbles in unison.

Jimin guffaws and proceeds to wolf down his lunch.

Jungkook begins to eat as well. He's tingling and warming all over because Taehyung served *Jungkook* first. *Even before Jimin,* Jungkook realizes with a daze.

Taehyung plops down in front of Jungkook on the other side of the counter. Jungkook watches Taehyung’s hands and the slender fingers, how they curl around a pair of chopsticks.

Remembrances of last night sway in Jungkook’s mind.

He peers down at his own hand, shivers erupting through it when his skin recalls the phantom of Taehyung’s touches.

Jungkook glances at his husband again.

Taehyung has a pensive look on his face as he stares at Jungkook’s left hand. His gaze darts up.

Jungkook’s fingers clutch around his hair clip, the metal and wood boring into the skin of his palm.

Jungkook’s mind trails back to his new comb. To Taehyung’s hands on Jungkook’s nape or in his hair, scratching his scalp; to them on Jungkook’s lower back, grounding; to them cradling the back of Jungkook’s hand while they feed the ravenous greed.

Jungkook thinks about Taehyung’s fierce protection; about Taehyung's curiosity and tentative affection.

Jungkook feels a little dizzy, like he’s falling, yet he can feel the chair beneath him, and the kitchen counter he braces against. He also feels a hand that steadies him when he sways forward.

It’s Taehyung’s.

Taehyung has caught Jungkook again, and Jungkook wonders if Taehyung will another time.

Chapter End Notes

So about the update schedule, I'm stressing myself out too much with it so while I'll still do my best to update weekly with smaller chapters, if it sometimes does not happen, and if updates are sometimes delayed because I'm writing a longer chapter, please understand 🥺

I write what I want and love to write, you know what I mean? And I sometimes just get so lost in the flow of it and feels of it that cutting the chapter can cut said flow and I don't like it at all, so I hope y'all understand and don't mind the delayed updates that may happen every now and then T____T 🤍

Thank you so so much for reading this chapter your comments are always appreciated, loved and read and I'm catching up on them!! Forehead kisses to y'all 🤍

PS: PROTECTIVE TAEHYUNG FOR THE WIN 🤩

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH20.

The axe (pretend it's fully made of blood)
Jungkook's hair clip I
Jungkook's hair clip II

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Three book covers for SLB in different colors made by pwettyboykoo_
❧ A writing about soft Taekook made by thwlxst
❧ Video edit of Taekook made by ninilovesgukkie

❧ Art of Taekook during the cleaning scene at the end made by artwithcloud
❧ Art of Jungkook and Revna (slight nudity) made by bunnysglow

Chapter 21: Hearts of Gold

Chapter Summary

Taehyung and Jungkook visit Amaris, and Taehyung does not expect the different internal crises he goes through before, during, and after it.

Chapter Notes

Alternate title for this chapter: Homosexual Crises.

Cw:

1) past child abuse
2) past emotional/physical abuse (nothing too graphic)
3) slur: "whorish" and "whore" in a few instances

If you would like to skip the main part that has those trigger warnings, you can skip the whole flashback that happens nearly at the beginning of the chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Objectively speaking, Taehyung knows Jungkook is beautiful.

It's something he had noticed right from the beginning when he had first met the Prince. Taehyung is aware of how Jungkook's beauty is one that he has rarely witnessed. It's one that Taehyung has never been confronted to, actually, because he doesn't remember ever meeting such a beautiful human or dragonborn in the past.

Taehyung doesn't understand why it's hitting him today of all days.

Maybe it's because he's properly looking, for once, rather than just glancing.

Taehyung had prepared himself an hour ago for their trip to Amaris. He had first intended to dress as he usually does — casual and comfortable —, however Jimin had put his foot down, talking about good impressions and all that nonsense Taehyung has no care for.

Taehyung has still somewhat dressed up for the occasion: he's opted for some loose fitting, beige blouse along with a simple pair of black trousers and his least tattered pair of boots.

The problem is that Jungkook has also dolled himself up. He, Namjoon and Yoongi are conversing together but the words don't register in Taehyung's brain.

Jungkook is wearing some sort of black bodysuit, a half pants, half corset, full whatever the fuck that thing is? It's regal and tight looking, with some layers here and there at the upper thighs, complimented by embroidery and some lines of lace displaying the skin of Jungkook's thighs.

The corset is a lot more simplistic than the bottom part of the attire, and what shocks Taehyung are two matters: 1) it's *winter,* yet the Prince is only wearing the corset, meaning that his shoulders, neck and arms are entirely naked — saved for the black gloves that ride up to his forearms, 2) Jungkook is also wearing a shoulder jewelry draped over his arms and collarbones, the piece fastened in a necklace around his throat and dangling over the collar thingy that he has put on.

3) how can a waist be so small?

Taehyung himself has a pretty small waist, however Jungkook's appears to be more narrow, somehow? Although it may be due to the corset that may further accentuate the Prince's curves.

Plopped down on a stool at the kitchen counter and facing the living room, Taehyung glances down at his own waist. Then he peers at Jungkook's form again, musing about how Jungkook is a lot more toned than Taehyung would ever imagine a human prince to be.

"You're ready for Seohyung's remarks? Because you know they'll be given," Yoongi worries.

Jungkook grins. "Always. I especially am today."

"Why?" Taehyung rises on his feet to join the group and *by the Elders*.

Jungkook's back is very, *very naked*, the corset only covering the front and stopping at the hips.

It's fucking winter.

Jungkook turns his head to peer at Taehyung, his hair wavy, curling over his forehead and framing his face. It's not as styled as it usually is, the strands less neatly sculpted and more haphazardly brushed. Taehyung likes it better this way.

"Seohyung hates clothes that reveal too much skin," Jungkook explains. "She says it's too— She doesn't like it."

Taehyung catches a whiff of strawberry when the Prince speaks. He glances down at Jungkook's lips and sure enough, a familiar shiny tint colors his already pink lips.

Is Jungkook expecting them to kiss?

"Which is exactly why you picked this outfit," Namjoon sighs.

"Yes. She'll nag at my hair anyway," Jungkook shrugs and makes his way outside of the house, not even bothering with his winter coat. "I'm ready to go if you are."

"Yeah, let's," Taehyung says.

Taehyung's hand finds its way on Jungkook's lower back before he even gets to think about how unnecessary it is because there's no pretense to be kept here. He thankfully manages to retract his arm just in time. Part of him is annoyed at how reflexive the gesture has become, while another part is confused as to *why* it's become reflexive in the first place.

Yoongi summons a large ink raven as he and Namjoon settle on its back.

Taehyung shifts to his dragon counterpart and he extends his talon for Jungkook to climb on. A growl rumbles in Taehyung's chest as he settles his arcane on his fire breath to heat up his talon and prevent the foolish prince from freezing to death.

"Ready?" Yoongi asks.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Jungkook says, peering at the citadel before him, but it doesn't sound very convincing.

Taehyung rests his palm on Jungkook's naked back, and Jungkook's tensed demeanor relaxes when Taehyung pulls him close.

Jungkook turns to face Taehyung as his eyes draw a once over of Taehyung's form before settling on the collar of the blouse. "You look good," he says and he tugs on the strings at the front, coiling one around his index while tugging on the other. "You actually made an effort to dress. Color me surprised."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Taehyung says and Jungkook rolls his eyes. "We should get inside."

Jungkook nods with a smile that does not reach his eyes.

The group advances toward the citadel, Jungkook greeting the maids they pass. A few throw concerned glances at his attire.

"You're highly underdressed for winter," Taehyung comments.

The curl of Jungkook's lips is a little more honest this time. Jungkook pauses and Taehyung does too. "Touch my arm."

"Huh?"

"Touch it," Jungkook instructs and lifts his arm.

Taehyung's eyes narrow but he does as asked. With the hand that is not placed on Jungkook's waist, Taehyung touches Jungkook's arm.

"Is my skin cold?"

"No."

"Do you know why?"

"No?"

"You're keeping me warm," Jungkook chuckles. "I knew you would, so I decided to wear whatever I wanted. Plus I really like this outfit, and I believe you do too," he adds with a little tilt of his head.

“You stared, Taehyung. For quite a while.”

Jungkook walks off without glancing over his shoulder, so Taehyung doesn’t get the chance to process anything, whether it be the confidence and playfulness in Jungkook's words, or the unbecoming warmth in Taehyung’s cheeks.

A maid bumps into Taehyung, pulling him out of his stupor.

Taehyung catches up to Jungkook’s side and he sprawls his fingers on Jungkook’s spine again, begrudgingly shielding the Prince from winter's cold with the warmth of his fire breath.

“Fucking brat,” Taehyung mutters to Jungkook’s ear, the remark received with his amusement that Jungkook muffles against his palm.

“Is this an admission of your fondness for my outfit?”

“Shut up.” Taehyung pinches Jungkook when the latter laughs.

They soon enter the hall then walk up a flight of stairs, making their way through a desolated corridor.

“Where are we going?” Taehyung asks.

“Seohyung’s office,” Jungkook says. “Might as well remove the thorn from our foot right a—”

“Jungkook.”

Taehyung and Jungkook’s heads both swivel around at the man’s voice.

Sungmin is standing at the end of the corridor, flanked by two guards that he promptly waves off. Jungkook stiffens next to Taehyung. Taehyung tightens his hand on Jungkook’s waist and the latter takes this as an invite to shuffle closer.

“My King,” Jungkook says, his expression settled into one of indifference.

“You seem well,” Sungmin says while he, himself, looks worn down, his eyes darkened and skin pale with evident fatigue.

“You do not,” Jungkook retorts. Taehyung clears his throat to conceal the snort that arose in him. “Has Seohyung’s venom finally gotten to you now that its main target is gone?”

Sungmin’s face pinches around a contrite frown. He pauses a few feet away from Taehyung and Jungkook. “Is he treating you well?”

“Why ask? You do not care."

“Jungkook,” Sungmin starts, “I never had a choice with Seohyung. She—”

“You had a choice to stop or prevent the mistreatment I’d undergo with Seohyung or my handlers, yet you never did. You let the isolation, the bathroom and the constant belittling happen.”

“She is my wife, Jung—”

“And I am your son,” Jungkook counters. “Illegitimate. A bastard son, but yours nonetheless.”

“I have tried,” Sungmin says.

Jungkook bursts into laughter. The sound is callous and *mean* and Taehyung would be disturbed by it if he wasn’t so content to see the Prince opposing Sungmin without an ounce of worry with Taehyung by his side.

“You’ve always put Seohyung first, Sungmin. So, please, do not begin to act like a father to me now that I’m away,” Jungkook derides. “Nevertheless, we’re here to speak with Seohyung for a brief moment, if you perhaps know where she is.”

“In her office,” Sungmin answers, glancing between Taehyung and Jungkook.

“Excellent.”

“I do not know what you have planned with your visit,” Sungmin starts, his demeanor growing warier, “however do keep in mind that she is Amaris’ Queen.”

“Oh fear not, my King. *I* won't raise a single finger on her,” Jungkook says, the curl of lips growing a little more calculating.

Taehyung purses his lips at the implication, but he thinks back on his torn chest and defiance of the Council to bring Jungkook back, and he promptly swallows down his retort.

“We should leave,” Jungkook says at Taehyung.

“Go ahead,” Taehyung says with a nod to the side. “I’d like to speak with him for a minute, if you allow it.”

“About?”

“Your mother.”

Jungkook surveys Taehyung for a moment. He must come to a satisfying conclusion because one of his hands rests above Taehyung’s chest and he leans forward to press a kiss at the corner of Taehyung’s mouth. “Be careful,” Jungkook says, his breath warm against Taehyung’s cheek.

“You know I won’t be."

Jungkook guffaws before sobering up when Sungmin’s eyes drift on him.

Then, Jungkook turns on his heels with a look at his father that is half a glare, half an eye roll, punctuated by a light jut of his chin as he makes his way toward Namjoon and Yoongi. The three of them disappear at the turn of the corridor.

Taehyung’s gaze slides on the King. The latter appears unnerved, and Taehyung briefly revels in it.

“You and him have gotten closer,” Sungmin notes.

“Cutting to the chase,” Taehyung dismisses. “There are a couple things I would like to know about his biological mother.”

If Sungmin is surprised by the question, he shows no signs of it. “I see Jungkook has confided in you about my… mistakes.”

Right.

Because Jungkook *is* a mistake to Sungmin, and Taehyung considers making a mistake as well, like throwing a king out a window.

“He doesn’t know anything about her,” Taehyung says, keeping hushed the existence of Jungkook’s arcane that Seohyung and Sungmin know without knowing, an occurrence that still confuses Taehyung to this day. “Leading me to my question: what do *you* know about her?”

Sungmin contemplates his response. “I do not know where she is, however Jungkook’s biological mother is still alive.”

“Are you in contact with her?”

“I was. The last time I saw her was a few months ago.”

“What’s her name? Her appearance? Or anything particular about her that we should look for if Jungkook wants to meet her one day.”

“I cannot tell.”

“Bullshit,” Taehyung scoffs.

“No. You do not understand,” Sungmin says and steps forward but pauses when Taehyung lowly rumbles a *‘Back off’*. “I want to tell you. But I cannot. I *cannot.* ”

Taehyung's eyes narrow

Could Sungmin be under a spell or oath? One that forbids him from speaking out crucial information about Jungkook’s mother?

“Is this a spell that *she* created? Is she a warlock? Or was it someone else?” Taehyung says, opting to act dumb to obtain information.

“It’s complicated,” Sungmin says with a curt nod. A drop of blood begins to trickle down his upper lip. “What I can say is that she— She is alive and—” He produces a handkerchief from the pocket of his vest that he presses against his nose. “She’ll want to meet him soon. If she hasn’t already. S—She’s secretive. Doesn’t like being seen. Unless she *wants* t—to be seen,” he pants and deeply heaves. “This is all I can tell you.”

“I see.”

“Be careful of Seohyung, please.”

“Jungkook and I will be fine,” Taehyung says and does not linger any longer.

Neither does Sungmin who nods then staggers down the corridor before readjusting his vest, straightening his stance and exiting the area.

Taehyung joins Jungkook a minute later, the latter alone.

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah,” Taehyung says and curls an arm around Jungkook. “Where are the others?”

“They went somewhere else,” Jungkook says. “And… Actually,” he tentatively begins, “do you want to see my bedroom?”

“Sure,” Taehyung says, interested to see where Jungkook has grown up.

It does not take them long to halt in front of a door that Jungkook pushes open. The two of them step inside, the door clicking shut behind them.

The bedroom is unkempt, dust covering the furniture, the bed, the edges of the windows and every surface. There are a few sparse cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. The smell in the area is stale, as though the windows have not been opened in weeks.

“Fucking hell. They didn’t keep it clean just in case?”

“Seohyung probably forbade everyone from entering my bedroom.” Jungkook walks toward the bed. “God forbid someone is nice to me.”

It isn't pity, but something akin to sympathy achingly twists in Taehyung's chest as he observes the bedroom.

There isn’t any sign that a child or a teenager has grown up there: no lingering toys, no drawings, no personality, as if the place never held any occupant. “Has your bedroom always been this… empty?”

Jungkook nods as he pulls down the blanket, folding it at the end of the bed. “I wasn’t allowed to have any kind of hobby, or keep anything that would interest me,” he says and climbs up on the mattress to sit on it. "Aside from clothes and jewelry, which is the only thing I could indulge into since it was important to be well dressed.”

“What… What was your safe space, then?” Taehyung wonders, reclined against the door.

“Hm? What’s that?”

“It’s—" Taehyung's jaw clenches. "It’s a place where, huh, where you go to. A place that feels safe, where you can just, I don’t know, let go or cry or be at peace.”

“I never had one,” Jungkook pensively says. “Although I suppose that Revna, Joon and Yoongi were my safe space?”

Taehyung shoves down the urge to hunt down the Queen to say “Can I look around?”

“If you want,” Jungkook chuckles.

Taehyung opens the drawer of a dresser, then the double doors leading to what appears to be a large walk-in closet that must be the size of Taehyung’s first floor at his and Jungkook’s house. It’s heartbreaking to witness firsthand how Jungkook has lived in so much impersonal opulence, yet has barely known the richness of a hug or family's love.

“You can, Lovely,” Jungkook says and Taehyung glances at Revna who slides out of the ruby to drape over Jungkook’s shoulders and nibble at a piece of the jewelry.

“I only remember you bringing some furniture and clothes when you moved to Vanae,” Taehyung says.

“Because that was the only thing I had to bring with me,” Jungkook says. “Joon would try to sneak some toys or colored pencils for me when I was young, but he’d get punished for it. Seohyung always had the maids scour my bedroom every now and then to take away what she had not approved of.”

Taehyung’s ire swells.

He marches toward the bathroom that he enters. It’s as untouched as the rest of the bedroom is. Two windows line up a wall, the blinds closed on the outside.

Taehyung frowns when he catches something glinting. He summons his fire around his hand to lighten up the room.

His eyes widen.

Two padlocks dangle from each window, fastened at the bottom and keeping the windows closed.

“What the fuck?”

“She put them there.”

Taehyung’s head swivels around. “Why the fuck would she?”

Jungkook looks impassive as he stares at the windows. Then he peers at Taehyung and grabs Taehyung’s wrist to lead him back inside the bedroom. The two of them settle on the bed.

“Revna,” Jungkook says, “can you grab the book and quill, please?”

Revna disappears inside the ruby before coming out a moment later, a book in her jaw.

“How does it work?" Taehyung inquires. "It’s the arcanic one, right?”

“It is,” Jungkook says and takes the quill. “As I told you at the manor, you can store memories in this book. It took some help from Yoongi and other warlocks he had worked with, but the ink Yoongi created for Revna is what allows the memories to be kept in the book and then reviewed later on,” he explains and opens it to the first blank page.

Revna sprawls on the bed and her jaws part opens, a pool of ink collecting at the bottom of her mouth.

“Memories can be stored through a few words like you had done it, or it can be more specific, with full sentences and even pages of writing. The more detailed you write, the more detailed the memory will be.”

Taehyung hums in understanding, fascinated by the complexity of Yoongi’s arcane even if he would never admit it out loud.

“Then, if I want to review a memory, all I have to do is think about which scene, write down a few or more words related to it, and the memory will then automatically play in my mind. Or in anyone’s mind who wishes to witness a memory.”

“Are the pages endless?”

“Mhm, yes. The writing disappears when I’m done storing a memory. I use it to store lost soul’s memories. Some of them can be taxing to remember, and so I put the heavier ones in the book to relieve my mind and the soul’s.”

“But you still remember,” Taehyung says. He had opted he would not when he had shown a sliver of his past to Jungkook.

“We do, but they’re not at the forefront of my mind. I suppose there’s a bit of a placebo effect that happens with this.” Jungkook flips through the book and he halts at a page that has the corner folded.

He’s silent for a while, then his head lifts.

“Do you want to see?”

“Do you want me to see?” Taehyung wonders.

When Jungkook averts his gaze, Taehyung taps the underside of Jungkook’s chin to get his attention.

They exchange a look.

“Do you?” Taehyung reiterates and Jungkook nods. “That wasn’t a ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

“Yes,” Jungkook quietly says.

Taehyung draws a small smile, hoping to be reassuring. "Let me see you."

Jungkook takes the quill, dipping it in Revna’s mouth before writing a series of words.

‘Bathroom tiles, sink pipe, night terrors’.

◯◯ *YEARS AGO* ◯◯

“Straighten your back.”

Jungkook does, worried.

“Do not speak a word unless you are prompted to. Smile. Always smile,” Seohyung says and Jungkook’s lips curl upward. “Not such a forced smile. You must look honest and kind,” she says with a smile, the same one she has before she locks Jungkook in the bathroom.

So Jungkook smiles. It looks more real now. That’s good. He doesn’t want his mother to be angry at him.

He takes the hand Seohyung extends toward him as they make their way inside a large house.

Jungkook is nervous. He nearly trips on the way there but he’s yanked on his feet by Seohyung. Jungkook lowers his head when he catches her glare. His shoulders withdraw on themselves.

They’re meeting a family today.

They’re rich, but not as much as Jungkook is. Or at least Jungkook thinks so because their house is smaller than the citadel.

The family has a kid. A boy.

The boy is pretty, Jungkook thinks as his mother and the parents of the boy greet each other. Jungkook smiles and it’s a true one because he’s happy to meet another boy. He rarely does. The boy doesn’t grin back though, and Jungkook deflates a bit.

Jungkook is alone with the boy later on, the two installed in a playroom.

The boy’s name is Yujun.

Yujun is pretty but he’s mean.

Jungkook doesn’t like him.

Yujun keeps talking about how he hates poor people, that they should listen to his family. Jungkook doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t know what to say, and he’s worried that Yujun may tell his mother if Jungkook speaks too much.

Jungkook thinks poor people are nice. There’s this old woman he likes to secretly visit. The grandma always gives Jungkook those sugary thingies that Jungkook loves a lot. He thinks they’re called canies? Cabies? Jungkook isn’t certain.

“Poor people are people like us. It’s not their fault if they’re poor,” Jungkook says, annoyed after Yujun has mocked someone. He startles when Yujun throws the toy he had been playing with against the wall.

“No they’re not! They suck!"

“They don’t suck.”

“Your mom said you’re nice but you’re not,” Yujun huffs. “You’re dumb.”

A flash of hurt flares in Jungkook. He hates being called dumb. “I’m not stupid…”

“Yes you’re stupid,” Yujun says and his hands fly toward Jungkook to painfully pull on the strands. “Stupid. My dad says stupid people should be taught a—a lesson.”

“It hurts.” Jungkook grips onto Yujun’s wrist to try and make the boy let go. “It hurts! Stop!”

“No! You’re stupid! More stupid than poor people!” Yujun uses both hands to yank on Jungkook’s strands and hit his head.

“Stop! Mother! Mom,” Jungkook shouts as tears begin to well in his eyes from the pain on his scalp. “Mo—”

The door swings open.

Yujun releases his hold and Jungkook springs to his feet to rush toward his mother.

“Jungkook,” Seohyung says and gently pushes Jungkook away from her. “What has happened?”

“He—He tugged on my hair, and it hurt a lot, and he hit my head,” Jungkook says in between two muffled sobs.

“Because he’s stupid,” Yujun says.

“I’m not!”

“My apologies,” Seohyung says with a smile. “My son can be a little slow at times, however he will learn.”

“But Mother I—” Jungkook never gets to finish his sentence when a hand smacks across his face, pain prickling in his cheek.

“Do not raise your voice at me or contest what I say. Understood?” Seohyung warns.

Jungkook nods. He’s scared.

Seohyung drags Jungkook to the center of the playground and forces him to sit. “You will stay here with Yujun, play with him, and listen to what he says. Do you understand, Jungkook?”

Jungkook wipes his face and swallows down the lump that swells in his throat so that he can speak. “Yes, Mother.”

Seohyung and Yujun’s parents exit the room.

“You’re really stupid,” Yujun says.

Jungkook smiles and nods. “Yes.”

“M’not lying. There was something,” Jungkook says and tries his best to hold back his tears.

His parents are fighting. They’re loud and shouting at each other. Especially his mother. Jungkook is sitting on the ground as Seohyung had demanded.

Jungkook had woken up to someone with missing limbs, only the torso left as they were crying for help. It was so scary Jungkook had peed his bed again even though he has been told not to because he's a big boy. At least he's not in the bathroom. Instead his mother had dragged him to her and his father's bedroom.

"Who was this whore you fooled with?"

"She… She was no one important, Seohyung."

"This is the fourth time this week that he speaks about seeing something in his bedroom and disturbs my sleep. It has been going on for at least two months. This child is *insane*. Fix it."

Sungmin walks toward Jungkook and he kneels in front of him. "What has been happening, Son?"

"I keep having nightmares and—and it's like, like I see other people's life," Jungkook stammers and tries to wipe the snot from his nose. "And I keep seeing weird people outside, or in my bedroom, with missing b—bodies, and it's scary."

"Cursed child. He is a curse to me and my empire."

"I will contact his mother," Sungmin says and stands.

Jungkook is lost because his mother is right there. Sungmin is speaking to her.

"You better not let this whore step a single foot inside my home."

"I won't."

"Give him some sleep potions in the meantime," Seohyung waves off.

"They're not recommended for children. They can impede their growth o—"

"I do not care," Seohyung says and Sungmin takes a step back. "Fix it, Sungmin. Now."

"No! Don't take her away! She's mine!"

"This snake bit me!"

"Because you hurt me!"

"*I* hurt *you*?" Seohyung shouts. "Your birth has been hurting *me* since the very beginning! I should have thrown away before wasting all those years raising you"

Jungkook wants to utter a retort but something squeezes his throat, the word dying on his tongue. It's never good to contest the Queen's demands, but she's about to take Revna away, holding the serpent by the neck.

Revna whines.

Jungkook's hands ball up into tight fists, the nail boring into the skin of his palms. Heated, prickling waves ripple through him one after another, all made worse when Revna begins to cry in his mind. He knows there isn't much he can do as a twelve years old. He can't win a physical fight against the Queen, but he can try to win another kind.

"If you don't give Revna back to me, I'll tell everyone that you're infertile and that you aren't my real mother."

Seohyung freezes at the doorstep.

"Even if people don't believe me at first, it'll raise questions, and they'll be curious and want to know."

Seohyung slowly turns around, Revna twisting in her grasp. "How—"

"I listen," is all that Jungkook answers.

Seohyung's face contorts around a glower. She remains immobile for a moment before she harshly throws Revna on the ground. "Keep her away from me. The second she comes near me, I'll behead her at once."

Jungkook waits until Seohyung slams the door shut to scramble toward Revna. He holds her against his chest, soothing cries.

"R—Revna scared."

"It's okay," Jungkook whispers. "I'll protect you, okay? You don't have to worry."

Jungkook has learned at a young age how malicious people can be.

Seohyung has been a prime example of it.

So Jungkook has learned how to be quiet and make himself as small as he can, where he does not attract anyone's attention, anger or punishment. That does not mean that he does not watch and listen, akin to now where he's hidden in a closet and peeking through the slit of the slightly opened doors. Jungkook isn't scared of dark and small places anymore.

"You— You bastard man and foolish child!" Seohyung yells.

"What was I supposed to do?!"

"Not fuck around with a whore who's— *God."* Seohyung emits a callous chuckle. "Of all women, you chose a warlock and—"

"I did not know. I had no idea she was a warlock and… I didn't know. I promise you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Sungmin holds onto Seohyung's elbow but she shrugs him off.

"Do not touch me. You disgust me."

“We’ll find a solution.”

“The solution is right there. Kill him.”

“No. I can’t— I can’t kill my own *son*, Seohyung. Are you out of your mind?”

Jungkook grows impossibly still. The tears run hot on his cheeks, heart wildly beating in his chest, his palms clammy.

“Kookie okay?”

“What else is there to do?! And think about it Sungmin,” Seohyung says and holds onto Sungmin’s arms. “We can use his death to garner sympathy and have other families agree to certain deals. We can even say that I’ve hurt myself after his death, and that because of this I cannot bear a child anymore. Then we can find another heir. A good one. I would have wasted years on Jungkook, but I could gain them back.”

“No, we— I’ll talk to his mother," Sungmin proposes. Seohyung steps away from him. “Something can be done that does not involve killing a *child*.”

“He is no child. He is a curse. A necr— He is no human.”

“What if he doesn’t know what he is?”

Seohyung pauses in her pacing. “How so?”

“Is it done?”

“Yes.”

“Everything will be fine, then?”

“Yes. They have been removed.”

“Good. *Good.”* Seohyung sighs. “What if it does not work?”

“Contact me,” the person says, “and we will see what else can be done. The extent of the spell should prevent his arcane from manifesting itself. His arcane is not sealed, however the spell should suffice. The mind is easier to trick than sealing an ancient arcane.”

“Understood," Sungmin says. "Thank you. What about Namjoon and Yoongi?”

“They do not appear to know about Jungkook’s arcane," the person says, "so there is no need for them to go through the spell.”

Sungmin nods. “I see. That is good.”

Jungkook knows that Seohyung is cruel, and he knows that his father is a coward.

He knows this.

Yet, as he’s laid down on a chair, tied to it with buckles at the ankles, the knees, the chest, the neck and head; as he’s staring at the ceiling of the basement, tears sliding down his temples; Jungkook realizes at once how selfish and profound Seohyung’s cruelty is. How dastardly Sungmin is.

Jungkook can’t say anything.

He has to pretend now. More than before. More than he ever has.

Forever this time, because he can’t let Namjoon, Yoongi, Seohyung or anyone else know.

He doesn’t understand why the spell has not worked on him. Or what has changed if it has gone through but not to its full extent. He can’t tell anyone either way. He'll have to make sure to not let anything slip so as to not alert Seohyung and Sungmin about the defective spell.

Jungkook is on his own.

At least Jungkook still has Revna, like he has for the past couple years, curled around his shoulders.

Her head twists then angles to the side as she does when she’s confused.

“Who are you?”

"Please.”

Jungkook pleads like he hasn’t in years but he’s *terrified*.

He doesn’t want to marry Seungwon.

Unlike the other human suitors that have been presented to Jungkook, Seungwon is a dragonborn. Jungkook tries not to be afraid of the man but he can’t help it. Seungwon is violent, vile and spiteful. He leaves marks on Jungkook from the bruising grips of his hands. He forces Jungkook to sit by his feet, reducing his days to insults, orders and a treatment that would rival one of a doll.

“Not him.”

“You must marry a dragonborn.”

“I will. I’ll marry any dragonborn but just— Just not him. Please. He’s—”

“This association will be good for Amaris,” Seohyung says, sitting opposite Jungkook with Sungmin.

“What about me?” Jungkook foolishly says even if he knows that Seohyung does not care about him. His eyes prickle and the feeling is so alien. Jungkook hasn’t cried in *years*. Not since that one day in the basement. “He’ll hurt me. He has." He shows a cut on his ribs, left behind by one of Seungwon’s rings. “I can’t stay with him. He… He’ll break me."

“You always were,” Seohyung snides. “You are nothing but the broken fruit of a worthless woman. A curse.”

“I’ll run away.”

“Go ahead,” Seohyung laughs. “Put yourself and your little needs before your own people. Bastard child, worthless child, *and* selfish child.”

“*Please,*” Jungkook tries to beg again. “I’ll do anything you want. I don’t want to go back to him.”

“You’ve barely stayed with Seungwon for a week,” Seohyung dismisses with a wave of her hand.

“Father, please.” Jungkook presses a hand against his mouth when a sob threatens to escape it. “Seungwon scares me.”

“Seohyung and I have decided, Jungkook. It will be fine,” Sungmin says. *The coward.* “As long as you listen to him, then—”

“Then what?!” Jungkook springs up. “I’m supposed to remain by his feet?! Be his doll for the rest of my life while he rules Amaris’ people?! His—”

“Yes,” Seohyung says with finality. “You will finally be good for something.”

“I—”

“Enough.” Seohyung has this look in her eyes.

Jungkook knows where he’ll be sleeping tonight.

He’s attached to the pipe’s sink minutes later. He waits for Seohyung to be gone to beckon Revna close to him.

Seohyung forgot to put Revna in her cage.

Revna spits out the hairpins that Jungkook dries before using them to unlock his cuffs then the bathroom’s door. With movements facilitated by habit, Jungkook climbs down his balcony and the citadel’s building then lands on the ground.

He runs toward the fences that he climbs over.

Jungkook races through the forest. He trips and falls on his knees at some point and he bursts into tears once far enough, sobs rattling through his form as he allows himself to cry as he wants to. Revna is warm around his neck, her head nestled in the dip of his neck.

Seungwon’s hand hasn’t left Jungkook’s leg. It’s high up the thigh but not reaching any higher. Yet. So it’s fine for now.

Thankfully Seungwon moves away from Jungkook to remove his vest and toss it on his desk.

“You’ll have to listen to me, doll. Being disobedient ain’t gonna do you any good.”

“Yes."

“You’re learning.”

“I am,” Jungkook smiles.

Seungwon walks toward Jungkook and Jungkook is forced to peer up at the man from where he’s sitting at the edge of the bed. The slap is expected, a result from Jungkook’s earlier rebuttal.

Seungwon has hit Jungkook hard enough to draw blood.

Jungkook is a little stunned and dizzy. Blood suffuses his mouth and he begins to cry on command. “I’m sorry for earlier. I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to disobey.”

“Imma teach you your place, doll.” Seungwon grabs Jungkook by the arm to throw him inside the bathroom. “Clean yourself. Fully.”

Jungkook sniffles and nods. “Understood. I’m sorry.”

“You’ll be,” Seungwon says and exits the room without closing the door.

Jungkook continues to make some sniveling and sobbing sounds as he stares at the shower tiles and begins to bath himself.

He thinks about his next plan.

He refuses to marry this man, and something will have to be done.

Jungkook is out of the shower half an hour later. He dries himself, slides on a pair of underwear and a white bathrobe. He forsakes the rest of the pajamas.

Seungwon is shirtless and in pants only. Jungkook walks up to him and kneels in front of him. Surprise washes over Seungwon’s face, trailed by contentment.

Jungkook internally laughs.

“Look at you,” Seungwon hums. “You *are* learning.”

“May we— May I speak?” Jungkook has to lure Seungwon for a little longer.

“Yes,” Seungwon says after a beat.

"May we have a trade?”

“What trade?”

“I obey you,” Jungkook says, sprawling his hands on Seungwon’s legs. “I do anything you want while you do anything you want to me, and in return you don’t hurt me.”

“Anything I want? Ain’t gonna go backtrack on that?”

“I won’t. I promise.”

"Revna don't like."

"Would you like me to please you tonight?"

Seungwon's gaze darkens. "I do."

"You won't hurt me? Please?" Jungkook insists because he can't make it seem like he complies too quickly. It would elicit some suspicion in Seungwon.

"I won't if you do well."

Jungkook smiles again. "May I stand?"

Seungwon yanks Jungkook up on his feet. "You're wearing anything under that?"

"Just my underwear. I thought it'd be better if I don't put on anything else," Jungkook says, slurring his voice a bit.

It works.

"Good," Seungwon says with a crooked smile. "Real good, doll."

"It'd be better on the bed," Jungkook mumbles, lowering his voice and acting coy as he averts his gaze. "If, uhm… If you're alright with laying down."

Seungwon settles on his back on the bed. Jungkook crawls up the mattress and straddles Seungwon's lap where he sits right above the crotch. Seungwon's tongue darts out.

Men are so easy, Jungkook thinks as he trails a hand up Seungwon's chest. He leans forward with a smile.

"You were complaining but you like it, hmm? Just need to learn your place, but you're coming to your senses."

"Maybe," Jungkook says with a playful chuckle. "There's something I want to tell you. Will you listen?"

"What s'it?"

"You need to open your mouth," Jungkook giggles and taps Seungwon's lips as his hand curls around the man's jaw.

Seungwon does. Because he's easy.

Jungkook bends over Seungwon, their chests nearly touching. He turns his head so that his mouth is an inch away from the lobe. When he speaks, his words are whispered, the smile in them audible to himself.

"Have you ever wondered what your ear tastes like?"

A shout erupts in the bedroom.

Jungkook straightens up and he spits the piece of earlobe he ripped in Seungwon's mouth.

Seungwon hurls Jungkook away from him, Jungkook falling feet away from the bed. Jungkook scrambles on his knees and he does not waste a second to run out of the bedroom then the house, the palpitations of his heart roaring between his ears both out of fear and vicious satisfaction.

He spits some of Seungwon's blood that is still in his mouth.

He enters the forest soon. He's careful to not leave any trace of his passage so that—

○○ *NOW* ○○

Taehyung somehow yanks himself out of the memory.

He's breathless, hazy from the onslaught of memories that are not his own yet felt as such, to a point where he could feel Jungkook's fear, his anger and surrender. Taehyung swears that he can taste something metallic on his tongue and he can't tell if it's a remnant from the memory or if it's due to his own teeth that have sunk into his cheek.

Something deeply revolted slithers within Taehyung.

Taehyung tries to digest all that he has seen: Seohyung's appalling abuse, then Seungwon's. Jungkook chained to a bathroom's sink.

It's fruitless though, and the chaos within Taehyung rumbles alive. He digs an elbow on his knee to cover his mouth with his hand in a vain attempt to quell down the turmoil the memories have elicited in him. It's unfamiliar to experience so much empathy for a human, however it's for Jungkook, Taehyung's husband.

Jungkook closes the book, tucking the quill at its center, then he says "Why are you crying?"

Taehyung blinks, only noticing now the tears clinging onto his lashes. He wipes with his thumb a treacherous one that escapes his eye. "Why aren't you?"

Jungkook shrugs. "I've already lived them."

Taehyung clears his throat as he watches Revna slide up the bed and curl on Jungkook's lap.

"I'm okay, Lovely," Jungkook says and pecks her crown. He chats with her for a bit, the two of them going back and forth in an animated discussion — or rather argument, it seems. It evolves to a hunt Revna must have made because Jungkook praises her, tapping her snout while her body undulates in a little dance.

"You won't ever come back here, alright?" Taehyung rasps, resolute.

Jungkook and Revna quieten. He tucks his hands under his knees as he leans forward. “Do you mean it this time?”

“*Yes.*"

Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip as he smiles. “Although, don’t do anything to her today.”

Taehyung clicks his tongue.

“I mean it. We can’t get rid of her yet.”

Taehyung scoffs this time.

“*Taehyung*. She can be useful to us. When her time comes, you can be true to your vow.”

Taehyung scowls at Jungkook. A silence stretches between them that he eventually cuts. “Fine.”

“Will you come with me to speak to her?”

“I intended to already.”

“Okay,” Jungkook says, rocking from left to right. “I want some bread.” He must be surprised by his own blurt out request because his mouth remains open as he stills. “I— Huh. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.. I— Forget about—”

“What kind?” Taehyung interrupts before Jungkook can spiral. Jungkook’s lips open and then close around nothing. Taehyung can tell Jungkook begins to withdraw away from both himself and Taehyung. “You can tell me," Taehyung pushes.

“You’ve granted me a lot already.”

“I haven't.”

How can it be a lot when, even if Jungkook was given *everything*, it still wouldn't be enough to make up for all that was taken from him.

Jungkook heaves through his nose. He glances at the bathroom before peering back at Taehyung.

“She’s not here. It’s just you and me. You’re asking me, not her.”

“Then can you—”

The bedroom door swings open.

Taehyung's hand twitches with the impulse to crush the woman standing at the doorstep.

“Yoongi and Namjoon have warned me about your unexpected arrival,” Seohyung says, her chin held high. “Why are you here?”

“I came to retrieve something and speak with you,” Jungkook says.

Seohyung's gaze darts on the bed. “What is this book?”

“Nothing that concerns you. It’s mine,” Taehyung says and snatches the arcanic tome.

“Follow me, if so. I am quite busy today.” Seohyung turns around to disappear in the corridor.

Jungkook groans and climbs down the bed. “Let me talk, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Taehyung waves Jungkook off, trailing after him.

“If you believe you can’t control your temper, you can stay here. I’ll come back to you when I’m done speaking with her.”

“Don’t patronize me. I’m not even that angry,” Taehyung says, a blatant lie that he knows Jungkook will see through.

“Your eyes are golden.”

Ah.

Taehyung may be a lot more pissed off than he had first assumed, and he smothers down his draconic heritage, letting it brew deep within.

Jungkook’s hand wraps around Taehyung's arm. “Your wrath is pretty. I love it.”

“It’s bloody.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re fucking insane, Viper.”

“Yes, but so are you,” Jungkook teases. “And I’ll keep your temper in check. I also like doing so.”

The retort lies at the tip of Taehyung’s tongue. A petulant *‘No you can’t’*. He says naught, however, because no matter how much Taehyung may try to deny it, Jungkook can *actually* keep Taehyung’s temper in check, which is as novel — *pleasing*, he can’t help but think — as it is disorientating.

So Taehyung shuts up for once, an occasion Jungkook doesn’t miss.

“I’m glad you agree,” Jungkook snickers.

“Shut up.”

Jungkook laughs even more.

Taehyung takes one last look at the bedroom before leaving and closing the door behind him. Jungkook won’t ever step a foot inside again. Taehyung will make sure of it.

“You’re underdressed.”

Taehyung promptly regrets the similar remark he had made to Jungkook, even if his own had been born from a place of concern.

“I’m not. I have my personal heater” Jungkook says and points in Taehyung’s direction, the two of them sitting on a couch, Seohyung poised in the one in front of them.

“I am referring to how much skin you are showing,” Seohyung clarifies. “It is not a good image to display.”

“What image am I projecting?”

“Whorish. Like your mother.”

Taehyung's foot shuffles on the ground and, really, he should muster a tad more self-control over himself but it all flies out the window barely ten seconds into the discussion. He leans forward but stills when Jungkook’s hand rests on his knee.

“You should cut your hair,” Seohyung continues.

“I should cut your head. Perhaps we can do both at once,” Taehyung offers. “I’ve heard that if you sever someone’s head from their body fast enough, they remain alive for a—”

Jungkook smacks his hand on Taehyung’s knee. “Stop it.”

Taehyung’s glare shifts from Seohyung to Jungkook. He rolls his eyes but makes a curt nod nonetheless.

“Shall we skip formalities?”

“Always. Why did you accept to ‘sell’ me to Dohyun?” Jungkook says.

Seohyung freezes at Jungkook’s straightforwardness while Taehyung snorts.

“Taehyung has shown discontentment at the idea of marrying you, while you have always shown your own toward a union with a dragonborn,” Seohyung says.

“I showed it toward being wedded with *Seungwon* .”

Jungkook already has to lead the conversation, and Taehyung doesn’t want to add his unnecessary temper on top of it.

So Taehyung rises to his feet. He paces around the room that is surprisingly deprived of any guards. He strains his ears as he passes by the entrance door. It’s quiet outside. Taehyung discreetly turns the key to lock the door.

“None of this really answers my question,” Jungkook says.

“I have.”

“No. Why did you believe you could give me to him? What deal have you made with Dohyun?”

“It only regards him and I.”

Taehyung passes by a series of large windows. This room is at the top of the Citadel, meaning that no one will be able to spy inside if anything is to occur. “I believe it concerns me, at the very least, considering that you’re trying to appropriate a stone able to eradicate my race.”

“How—”

“A little bird told us,” Jungkook says.

Seohyung sighs, her legs crossed and arms folded over her lap. “Dohyun said he would help me retrieve something, if I am to accept his possession over you.”

“The ‘something’ being the primordial stone,” Jungkook summarizes. “Do you know where it is?”

“I do not.”

Taehyung does not bother looking at Seohyung to verify the truth or lie behind her admission. Instead he surveys Jungkook, picking up on the way Jungkook’s shoulders faintly relax, his stony expression turning more curious.

So Seohyung is telling the truth.

“What do you know about the stone?”

“How about I bring your father here to—”

“Don’t move,” Taehyung warns as he peers outside the window. “The door is locked. We’re on the last floor, and you haven’t brought any guards with you.” He turns to smile at her. "Pride is an insidious killer, is it not?"

“Answer us.”

Taehyung opens the window, allowing the wind to whirl inside. Most humans would instantly die from this height, he pensively muses and closes the window.

“You cannot kill me,” Seohyung says with a mocking laugh.

"Not yet, perhaps. But what about later? What about when you're travelling to a city? When you're bathing, sleeping, eating; when you're at your most vulnerable, unaware of the demons that may be lurking behind a curtain, in your bed, in your drink…"

Jungkook's eyes are lidded around the venomous curl of his smile.

A shiver runs down Taehyung’s spine. He's not scared of Jungkook. If anything, he's *fascinated.* Enraptured and curious and a little taken by the danger Jungkook represents.

Seohyung's composure falters. The tremors in her hands don't escape Taehyung’s scrutiny. “I should have killed you when you were a child.”

“I still wonder why you didn't.”

"I own you."

Jungkook emits a sardonic hum. "What you own is answers. Tell us everything you know.”

Seohyung’s gaze darts between Taehyung and Jungkook. “There is… a disease killing dragonborns. I believe you are already aware of this.”

“Is the primordial stone linked to it?”

Seohyung nods. “We have yet to find its location, however according to some trusted sources, we have evaluated that the stone is a catalyst for the disease, and that it may be able to channel and redirect the disease.”

“Redirect?”

Jungkook’s memories, the fright and loneliness in them, are fresh in Taehyung’s mind. His ire is still there, crackling the longer he stays in Seohyung’s presence, the longer *Jungkook* has to be in the same room as her.

“I do not know the intricacies of the stone, nor do I know how to acquire or activate it,” Seohyung says.

“What are you hoping to do with it?” Taehyung asks.

“I believe possessing a stone brimming with an arcanic disease able to kill dragonborns can be an excellent tool to subjugate their kind,” says Seohyung who does not bother with lies. She must know it’s pointless.

“You speak freely," Jungkook notes.

Seohyung chuckles and it grows into a laugh, something dark and twisted. "You can't kill me, Jungkook. You *cannot."*

"Yeah?" Taehyung starts and begins to cross the distance, but he halts when Jungkook raises a hand.

“You find use in me. I can be a bridge between you and Dohyun. I can share with you any information Dohyun and his warlocks may find about the stone and the disease,” Seohyung continues. “You were never this talkative in the bathroom, Jungkook, aside from pathetic whines and sobs. You must feel powerful married to a dragonborn now, for it must be the only reason why a curse like you would believe he is worth anything when your own mother discarded you like the dirty sheet in her bed.”

“I feel free,” Jungkook says before Taehyung can intervene. “For the first time I am free.”

“You will always be Amaris' Prince. You’ll always be tied to my empire. To *me* .”

“I’m known to break out of my bounds,” Jungkook shrugs. He heavily sighs and he hums to himself as he observes Seohyung. “What should I do with you… What do you think?” He asks and peers at Taehyung.

A staccato rumbles in Taehyung’s chest. He’s not in any mood to participate in whatever game Jungkook is having with Seohyung. He gives Jungkook a pointed look that the latter understands because he sheepishly smiles at Taehyung.

“Dohyun appears to hold a strange captivation for Taehyung. He refers to you as his dove,” Seohyung says and Taehyung’s skin crawls at the appellation. “He has recounted to me some tales about certain arcanic vows that were professed. Something about a challenge of the draconic council and being thrown to Bastille. You may be loved by Amaris’ people, Jungkook, however do

not forget that I have many connections, whether with humans, warlocks or dragonborns. I know plenty of the latter who would happily aid me in containing a chaos dragon. It begs the question of whether or not you would risk Taehyung's freedom to enact a petty revenge.”

Taehyung’s fingers tighten around his arms.

“The enemy of my enemy is my ally, a relationship that can greatly vary depending on you.” Seohyung rises to her feet. “As of now, Taehyung is an enemy to me and the Council, while the Council is my ally. However the Council is an enemy to you both, and will eventually become mine too. You always complained about never being given a choice, Jungkook, so I am proposing one to you now: would you rather be my ally, or my enemy?”

“The Council won’t aid you the second they know what you strive to achieve,” Jungkook says.

“Oh you would be surprised to know how much more terrified the Council is of a chaos dragon, than of a human queen who makes herself appear gullible and meek," Seohyung says. “What will it be, Jungkook?”

Jungkook stands and approaches Seohyung, pausing a foot away from her.

Taehyung keeps an attentive eye on Seohyung's motions.

"I do not need allies to prevail. You may be useful to me, but that is all that you are. A means to an end. A doll to be utilized until I've deemed you worthless." Jungkook pauses a foot away from Seohyung whose face contorts around equal fury and dread. "You talk and talk and *talk,* yet there must be a reason behind your tremors, behind the desperation to present yourself as an important asset to me. You finally know, don't you? You know that, one day, I will take your life, Seohyung, and it will be the greatest choice I will ever make.”

Seohyung’s lips curl but it’s crooked and unnerved. “You will always—”

“I need the key to the private section of Amaris’ library,” Jungkook deflects and straightens up. “Now.”

Seohyung takes a step back. She turns around to stride toward her desk where she rummages through a drawer. When she halts in front of Jungkook once more, it’s with a key she hands to him.

Taehyung snatches the key from her. Jungkook shouldn’t be touched by her again. But the problem is that Seohyung still reaches for Jungkook, more specifically his wrist.

So Taehyung sees a little red at the motion, even more when Jungkook visibly stiffens too, his confidence faltering.

Technically speaking, Jungkook forbade Taehyung to *kill* Seohyung.

A broken bone does not necessarily equal death.

A crack elevates in the room when Taehyung grips Seohyung’s forearm and unceremoniously snaps the two bones.

She shouts, too loud for Taehyung's liking, and so he smacks a palm against her mouth while he trips and pins her onto her back on the couch. The wood winces under her when Taehyung shoves her harder against the surface.

“Don’t mistake our mercy for indifference,” Taehyung warns. “Next time you try to touch him in any kind of way, your arm is gone.” He waits for Seohyung to nod before he considers letting her go, and he wants to — *should* —, but Taehyung only tightens his clasp, his nails digging into her skin as her erratic breathing echoes in the quiet room.

“We can leave, Tae,” Jungkook says.

Taehyung feels a hand on his nape, then a thumb that brushes at the side of his neck. He releases his hold.

Seohyung gasps and coughs, holding her arm against her chest. “Y—You inhumane beast.”

“Come on.” Taehyung presses a hand on Jungkook's lower back that drifts to the waist.

The two of them exit the office. They made their way down the corridor and toward the staircase.

Taehyung clicks his tongue. He releases his hold around Jungkook to shove his clenched fists in his pants’ pocket. “What a fucking pointless conversation. Stupid bitch.”

“It wasn’t pointless,” Jungkook says. “We got confirmation about the stone's properties.”

Taehyung still finds the discussion useless. Seohyung is still alive, after all.

“This was messed up,” Jungkook says.

“What was?”

“Breaking her arm.”

Taehyung’s steps falter a bit before he continues forward.

He *had* snapped. A little. Not as destructively as it could have been, but his temper had gotten the best of him there. A tiny bit. He's still taken aback by how Jungkook seems bothered by it, however it makes sense, doesn't it? Who in their right mind wouldn't be repulsed by Taehyung's chaos?

"I…” Taehyung trails off.

“Hm?”

“I know it may be hard to believe considering what happened a few days ago, and… And what I just did, but I’m not the violent kind,” Taehyung lowly mutters. “I mean... It depends on who provokes me. If they’ve badly wronged me or someone close to me, because then I can get… volatile. But it’s—”

“Oh you’re entirely misunderstanding me. I was wondering why you suddenly looked so upset.”

“Uh?”

“What I was referring to when I said it was messed up, was how much I enjoyed the sound of her bone just…” Jungkook makes the demonstration of him breaking something, punctuating it by a quite accurate sound effect. “So don’t get me wrong. I’m glad you did it. Happy, actually. I can’t stand her touch,” he says and holds onto Taehyung’s arm with both hands, pressing himself close to him. “I wouldn’t be against hearing it again.”

“Oh."

Taehyung should be concerned by Jungkook's confession, right? Yet all he feels is relief.

And a dash of pride.

“That’s good?” Taehyung says.

Jungkook’s shoulders shake as he muffles his laughter against Taehyung’s arm. “Is it? Because if anything, *you* should be the disturbed one.”

“I liked the sound too,” Taehyung blurts out.

The two of them fall quiet when they reach the first floor.

Taehyung only speaks again when they’re out of earshot of any spying ear, outside of the Citadel and waiting for Namjoon and Yoongi. “I asked a couple questions to your father.”

“Oh yes, I forgot.”

“I asked him if your mother is still alive.” Taehyung surveys Jungkook who looks pensive, the latter fiddling with the string of Taehyung’s shirt.

“I don’t want to know the answer for now,” Jungkook says. “I probably will later, but for now I just… There’s already a lot going on, you know?”

“You don’t have to explain.”

“I know, but I want to,” Jungkook says and meets Taehyung’s gaze. “Has he said anything else?”

“Nothing interesting."

“We can put that aside for now, then. And thank you for not hurting Seohyung any worse even though you clearly wanted to.”

“What a weird thing to thank me for...”

“When I’ll allow you to kill her, will you?”

“Yes,” Taehyung says without a sliver of doubt.

Jungkook smiles and rests his head above Taehyung’s shoulder.

This might be all in Taehyung’s head, however it feels as though Jungkook is especially… clingy, today.

Jungkook hasn’t really left Taehyung’s side once, whether it be while they had gone to Jungkook’s bedroom earlier, or when they had left the citadel and had driven in a cart. Jungkook had

immediately claimed the spot on Taehyung's left and had started to excitedly chat about his people and the city. Taehyung had carefully listened.

The Prince's obvious yearn for proximity still remains as the group of four is installed at a table at Amaris' library.

Jungkook had glared at Namjoon when the latter had made the apparently unforgivable mistake of sitting on the vacant chair on Taehyung's right, and so Namjoon had been sternly encouraged — forced — by the Prince to leave his seat.

Clearly in a better mood now that he's next to Taehyung, Jungkook flips through a book, his silver hoops swaying whenever he moves his head. Jungkook's lips are pursed into a pensive moue and Taehyung's thoughts trail back to the first time he had arrived at Amaris and how he had viewed Jungkook back then.

So much has changed now.

"Can we please focus on why we're here," Namjoon groans after Jungkook has raved for a good ten minutes about a district in Amaris.

"Yes, yes," Jungkook sighs with an eye roll. "We can start with the history section."

This time, Taehyung is the one to groan.

"What?"

"I hate history unless it's related to arcanes."

"History is interesting."

"It's boring."

"You know what else is boring? Your complaints." Jungkook yelps when Taehyung pinches his thigh. "Don't be so childish," Jungkook says and stands. "You can carry the books for me if you don't want to read. Or if you *can't* read."

Taehyung opts to zap Jungkook who sashays with a giggle toward a section of bookshelves of the private room of the library, the latter deserted save for Taehyung's group.

They split the work between the four of them, to Taehyung's dismay. Meaning that Taehyung has to, Hell forbid, read history books — also to his dismay. And the worst thing is that they find jackshit in them aside from dull, mind-numbing tales about Aurora.

Revna is out of the ruby, the room's door locked shut to prevent any intruder from entering. She's curled into a ball on Taehyung's lap because both Jungkook *and* Revna have been attached at Taehyung's hip.

Jungkook's clinginess — if that is a word? Taehyung isn't certain — somehow gets worse. Although 'intense' would be a better term.

Jungkook keeps taping Taehyung's forearm whenever he reads something funny or interesting in a book he's skimming through so that he can show it to Taehyung. Sometimes Jungkook's hand remains there for a few minutes or more, its weight light and warm above Taehyung's wrist. Other

times, the hand finds its way on Taehyung's thigh when Jungkook leans to the side to read above Taehyung's shoulder.

It's confusing, really.

And odd.

It tickles Taehyung's curiosity whenever Jungkook's fingers do because he doesn't recall ever seeing Jungkook behave like this with someone else. Not even with Yoongi or Namjoon. Not even with Taehyung, up til now.

"Oh damn, I forgot about that."

"About what?"

"All those natural catastrophes that used to happen centuries ago," Yoongi says.

"That's why the lands of Zenalis and Fairis are all cracked at the coast. They're remnants of the earthquakes and other catastrophes," Jungkook explains. "Was Vanae touched by those?"

"Yeah. Initially the series of islands on the east of Vanae was part of the mainland," Taehyung answers.

"The source of those catastrophes were never mentioned," Namjoon chips in.

"I'll always find it weird how those catastrophes all vanished after the Great War. Something must have stopped them but I wonder how. It's not as if one can prevent nature from living its course."

"The Accords were signed not long after the Great War, right?"

"Yes."

"Ah yeah, this infamous historical moment where humans finally had the upper hand on dragonborns and stole a plethora of riches and lands from us," Taehyung scoffs. "That peace treaty was forced upon my kind after the decimation we had gone through."

"Dragonborns also decimated a large population of humans," Yoongi counters. "Whether during the war or back during a time where dragonborns would snatch humans out of their home to do God knows what with them."

"Well… That too. History is never black or white. Humans and dragonborns have both wronged each other. Some more than others," Namjoon admits with a glance at Taehyung. "I believe the Accords being made is also when Kaiya has become inhospitable, something we'll have to look into since we'll be visiting soon."

Jungkook and Yoongi respond while Taehyung slumps down his chair and tunes out the conversation.

He should have brought some wood to sculpt to save his mind from being carved by history.

Taehyung grabs a book at some point to pretend that he's participating in the activities, and from the pointed look Jungkook levels him with, Jungkook is highly aware of Taehyung's act.

Jungkook leaves the table minutes later and when he comes back, he takes Taehyung's current book to replace it with another. Taehyung makes a sound of confusion as Jungkook focuses back on his own reading.

Taehyung turns the book to look at the front cover.

'A 101 interesting facts about Amaris flora.'

Taehyung silently stares at Jungkook. He glances at an inattentive Namjoon then at Yoongi who rolls his eyes at Taehyung. Taehyung scowls at the warlock and opens his book.

He reads – truly — and this time he pretends that the warmth that rises in his chest is from his arcane, rather than from the second book Jungkook has left in front of Taehyung, this one about Amaris' fauna.

After exhausting the private room of the library, the group has ventured into the public area where they have settled to avoid the constant back and forth between the first and third floor. Namjoon and Yoongi soon vacate the place so go to fetch some food and drinks for everyone.

Taehyung is sitting at the table tucked against the wall, Jungkook seated in front of him. There's a window on Taehyung's right and Jungkook's left, half open to allow the cool air to breeze into the room.

They've been at the library for about four hours now.

Taehyung wants to perish.

Thankfully, the atrocious outing is made better by a few things though. First: the silence and peace. Second: the fact that Taehyung can stare outside the window, zone out to his heart's content to then read some books about a subject of interest like botany.

Third: his curiosity.

Taehyung has an elbow propped on the table, chin tucked in his palm to support his head. A book is held in his other hand that he has not read a single word from. He could blame it on the fact that he's a little tired, or he could lie and say that the book is a horrifyingly boring one that can't grasp his attention.

The full truth would be that he's too preoccupied staring at the Prince like *a damn creep*.

Which is mental, really, because the tome is about all sorts of arcanes, in other words one of Taehyung's most cherished passions, but Jungkook is distracting.

It's fucking annoying.

What's even more annoying is that Taehyung isn't actually irritated by the distraction Jungkook makes.

Jungkook is humming to himself, whispering to Revna from time to time. The jewelry draped over his toned shoulders and arms shimmers whenever he moves because a ray of sunlight basks his left side in a golden stripe, the sun cascading on the white gold chains and precious gem stones.

It's all very regal and must have cost an unimaginable amount of coins, which leads Taehyung to a pit of amusement when he thinks about Jungkook's relationship with money.

Jungkook's heritage and the wealth he has grown with can easily be seen. Akin to that one time where Jungkook had received his allowance from the citadel and had frowned at the fact that he had 'only' been given 15 000 gold coins. It's more than what most people can earn in half a year, yet Jungkook had been so hilariously miffed that he had taken it upon himself to write a well worded letter demanding more money to the citadel.

No matter how down to earth Jungkook may be, he is still the most eminent and prosperous human prince. So Jungkook is wealthy, and it shows in instances like these through the jewelry and clothes he wears, but also in the way he carries himself.

Taehyung's gaze drags from Jungkook's poised shoulders up to the neck. It pauses on the ruby necklace but also on the wedding pendant, Taehyung's white scale drawing a delicate contrast to Jungkook's skin. Taehyung's eyes then move up to the earlobes, flicking past the earrings and trailing upward.

One of Taehyung's fingers twitches against his book.

Jungkook's eyes are lowered on the page he's reading, half lidded from this angle. The sun casts an aerial light on the side of Jungkook's face, his eye now more of a molten brown.

This isn't what catches Taehyung's attention the most.

It's the way the shoulder jewelry reflects the sunlight on Jungkook's face in a rain of dusted, white pearls that undulate at every movement Jungkook makes, at every tilt of his head. The reflected drops narrow and sharpen then expand and blur; they lower on the neck and veil more of Jungkook's face and they move like a glimmering water, and the sight is—

It's—

It's pretty.

Jungkook is *so* beautiful.

Taehyung hasn't painted in years. He has always preferred carving and the feel of wood beneath his hands, however he used to paint here and there whenever the mood would strike him. His fingers itch to do so right now.

"Do you dislike what I'm wearing?"

To Taehyung's horror, he startles hard enough to loudly knock his knee against the table's leg. He nearly jolts on his spot again when Jungkook's eyes dart upward and lock on Taehyung.

"Do you?" Jungkook presses, his gaze cold.

"No. Why?"

“You’re staring. At the house I thought it was because you liked my outfit, but you still keep glancing at me without saying anything. So…” Jungkook shrugs.

The white gold reflections fluctuate on his cheek.

Embarrassment creeps within Taehyung at the call out. Then bewilderment rises because Jungkook sounds insecure. Jungkook *is* insecure, and it blows Taehyung’s mind.

“I am referring to how much skin you are showing. It is not a good image to display, Jungkook.”

“What image am I projecting?”

“Whorish.”

“I don’t dislike what you’re wearing."

Jungkook surveys Taehyung for a brief moment before looking down. “Okay.”

Taehyung still stares at Jungkook who shrinks a bit on his chair. Then Taehyung peers at his book, an attempt at nonchalance to pretend he does not spend several minutes formulating what he wants to say. “You look good.”

A lull floats between them after Taehyung’s admission.

When Taehyung looks up again some time later, wondering if he has fucked everything up, he sees the way a pliable blanket of coyness envelops Jungkook, the latter's fingers folded over his mouth.

“Do I?” Jungkook says, his voice hushed.

Taehyung nods.

“You don’t mind what I’m wearing?”

“Not in a bad way.” Taehyung internally winces at how his words can be wrongly interpreted.

“I really like jewelry."

“I know.” Taehyung is aware of the vanity dresser and more boxes brimming with bracelets, necklaces and more precious knickknacks that occupy Jungkook's bedroom but also their bathroom.

“It’s okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook mumbles.

The aching tug is pulled.

Jungkook still looks uncertain — *sad* — and he lowers his head that he supports against his balled up fist.

“You’re—”

Taehyung falls mute when Jungkook peers up at him. Taehyung feels oddly skittish and nervous. He swallows and his throat clicks when he does.

“You’re beautiful, Jungkook,” Taehyung says, the words raspier than wanted, quieter than intended. “Whatever you decide to wear doesn’t make you what Seohyung said, no matter how long, short, covering or displaying the clothes you put on are. You— Uh... You’ll look beautiful in whatever you want to wear.” Taehyung fiddles with the edge of the book’s cover, feeling progressively more awkward because he has no fucking clue of what he’s saying and how to *stop talking.* “Gonna sound like a petty child, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s some jealousy at play there on her part, aside from her being an absolute pig. So. Yeah. What she says is whatever. Doesn’t change anything from the fact that you’re pretty. Or handsome. Or—” He makes a vague hand gesture. “Or whichever adjective you prefer.”

Taehyung clears his throat, adamantly refusing to meet Jungkook’s gaze. However, and in spite of his better judgment, he eventually darts his eyes on the Prince when the latter doesn’t speak a word for a while, the silence unnerving.

Jungkook’s face is flushed, perhaps the most it has ever been, while his gaze shifts over Taehyung’s face. Then, as Taehyung expects it to happen whenever Jungkook grows a little shy, one of Jungkook’s hands raise to his mouth.

“Do you really mean it?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Jungkook's smile is audible in his voice. “I can’t believe you called me beautiful again.” He slumps over the table, folding his arms on it and hiding his face in the crook of his elbow. He straightens up again a second later, this time his hands covering more of his face, only his eyes peeking through his fingers. “Do you really find me beautiful?”

“I do.” Amused by Jungkook’s coyness, Taehyung adds “You’re beautiful.”

Jungkook's answered *'Thank you'* is muffled against his palms.

“You’re welcome.”

“Can— Can I have some bread? I really want a loaf right now.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung says, curious about what kind of bread Jungkook wants.

“Can you move one seat to the side, please?” Jungkook requests and Taehyung complies. “Thank you.”

Jungkook slides his books toward where his new spot is. He stands and rounds the table, occupying the chair on Taehyung’s right that he scoots closer to Taehyung, near enough for their knees to bump when Jungkook crosses a leg over the other.

Jungkook fidgets with his wedding ring for some time after this, and Taehyung pretends to be absorbed by his book as he waits for Jungkook to come to a conclusion on what he wants to ask. Taehyung could prompt Jungkook to speak, however he prefers to let Jungkook talk on his own

terms here. Maybe the Prince can begin to understand then that requesting something won't make him a burden.

“Can I take your wrist?” Jungkook eventually asks.

Taehyung agrees.

Jungkook grabs Taehyung’s wrist that he brings toward his neck, Taehyung’s palm and fingers reflexively sprawling over the nape. Jungkook sighs, his body immediately sagging beneath Taehyung's touch. “Do you mean it?”

“Hm? About?”

“Do you really think I’m beautiful? Or were you just saying it to be kind?”

“I meant it. You don’t agree with it?”

“I mean. Objectively speaking, I know I’m handsome, but… You know. Insecurities,” Jungkook dismisses. “There are some things I’d like to wear, like what I have on today, but I don’t know if it’d look good on me. I don’t want to appear like Seohyung said.”

“You wouldn’t. You can always show your outfit to me or someone else if it can help.”

“Maybe, yes.” Jungkook's lids flutter close as his head lolls forward when Taehyung kneads his thumb under the lobe. “I wanted some loaves the whole day, but—”

“Good thing you asked.”

Jungkook watches Taehyung. He nods then smiles and he grabs his book to resume his reading. Taehyung does too as he props his arm on the back of Jungkook’s chair, absentmindedly grazing a finger at the spot on the side of the throat while playing with the hair curling at the base of Jungkook’s scalp.

Namjoon and Yoongi arrive with their food half an hour later.

Jungkook tenses when his friends settle down.

Taehyung doesn’t get why, but he takes his chopsticks and begins to eat with one hand, keeping his other one where Jungkook requested it. It seems to do the trick, for some reasons? Because the stiffness in Jungkook dissipates and he even smiles at Taehyung again before ducking his head to concentrate on his meal.

Jungkook is very clingy.

It’s particularly interesting for Taehyung because it echoes with how he has seen some dragonborns behave like this with him when he had been younger. Although the main difference here is that Taehyung does not experience the knee-jerk reaction to reject Jungkook.

Taehyung reclines in his chair. He tries to focus on his book while Jungkook, Namjoon and Yoongi discuss together. Taehyung *really* tries to read, however his attention keeps straying on Jungkook, as if a ribbon is pulled and strained on that only relaxes when Taehyung’s gaze falls on Jungkook.

An hour passes, and Taehyung’s hand has left Jungkook’s nape.

Jungkook's back is bare, saved for the dangling chains and intricate piece of diamonds at the center. Taehyung's fingers drum on the chair as he stares at Jungkook. He wants to touch. However Jungkook hasn't asked for more bread.

Would it be weird to touch Jungkook unprompted? What would Taehyung even say?

'Hey, your skin is really soft, I like it, so can I touch it?'

Taehyung internally writhes.

He doesn't want to overstep his boundaries, so he settles on a safer contact approach: he hooks an index over one of the chains.

Taehyung's gaze darts up on Jungkook's face.

Jungkook doesn't seem to have noticed the motion.

Taehyung peers down at the jewelry again and he rubs the chains between his fingers, enjoying the warmth and smoothness of the white gold. He pinches the tiny hoops, twirling them around his finger and either Jungkook still doesn't catch onto it or has chosen to ignore Taehyung because he does not budge an inch.

Taehyung continues to fiddle with the chain while he continues to read.

He gets quite engrossed in the book, enough to not pay much attention to his ministration.

So Taehyung's head whirs up when his fingers accidentally bump against something soft minutes later.

Taehyung catches the light startle in Jungkook and he's about to apologize when Jungkook turns his head to observe Taehyung, the lower part of his face tucked in his palm.

They silently stare at each other, one awkward and the other impossible to read.

Instead of shunning Taehyung, Jungkook shuffles more toward the edge of his chair and closer to Taehyung. The implicit permission is bashful, however Taehyung still hears it.

Taehyung does not look away — he does not think he could anyway —, when he gently scrapes the nail of his index along the middle of Jungkook's back, right above the pebbling spine, and Jungkook sinks into his seat with a small, content exhalation, his crossed legs pressing against Taehyung's in a warm closeness.

It feels as though Taehyung is delineating music notes of a new song.

Taehyung delineates the shapes of a new song when he places his fingertips on Jungkook's naked back and lets his thumb draw haphazard notes there, appreciating the softness beneath the pulp of his fingers. Taehyung wants to hear more, so he scratches his nails along the length of Jungkook's spine, writing more signs on the silky music sheet: up and down, left and right, the motions feather light and running in-between two chains.

A new shudder sings through Jungkook's form, accompanied by a beat of goosebumps.

Taehyung glances up at Jungkook, however his gaze collides with Yoongi's.

Taehyung freezes, as if caught red-handed doing something forbidden. Yoongi's eyes are unreadable, piercing through Taehyung, and Taehyung is about to retract his hand when Jungkook moves.

Jungkook turns sideways and props his feet on the cross stretcher of Taehyung's chair, hands clasped together around his book. He leans forward, effectively invading Taehyung's vision. Their gazes lock on one another.

Jungkook looks sleepy, his eyes lidded and a certain languor weighing his motions.

Taehyung's fingertips tentatively resume their graze on Jungkook's spine but when his thumb passes over a thin, jagged scar, he lets the mute question settle on his face.

"Seungwon," Jungkook whispers.

Taehyung nods. Ire flashes in him, but it's tempered by Jungkook's growing somnolence as Taehyung's hand flattens between Jungkook's shoulders, right under the jewelry, soothing himself and Jungkook.

Taehyung has always loved touching certain fabrics and materials, having been given countless stuffed toys that he would critically examine the smoothness and quality of when he had been a child. He particularly loves silk, and Jungkook's skin resembles it.

"Tae?"

"Mhh?"

"I want to go home."

Jungkook does not speak any further. Neither does Taehyung aside for when he warns Namjoon and Yoongi of their departure.

Jungkook does not move right away while Taehyung stashes into a satchel the books they've found interesting or useful, his gaze following Taehyung's each and every move. All it takes is a *'Come on'* from Taehyung for Jungkook to stand and plaster himself against his side.

If Jungkook had been clingy before, he's glued to Taehyung now.

Jungkook even complains when Taehyung has to turn into his dragon self to fly them back to Vanae, talking about how *'We can use a carriage or fly with one of Yoongi's ravens'* , the proposal riposted by a *'It'd take weeks to get there in a carriage, and I don't think Taehyung trusts me enough to fly on my raven'*. Easy to say that the Prince isn't pleased *at all* if his scowl, sullen huff then complete silence are any indication.

Jungkook glares at Taehyung. "Can we at least take some breaks? So you can turn back to human?"

"It'll make the trip even longer, Viper." Taehyung can't quell his amusement at Jungkook's swelling temper. "You can just sleep in my palm," he adds and Jungkook perks up at this. "The trip will pass by faster if you nap."

"'kay… I'm sleepy."

"I know."

Jungkook unfastens his shoulder jewelry when he climbs on Taehyung's talon. He curls into a ball there, cradling Revna in his arms as he closes his eyes and promptly falls asleep. Taehyung covers Jungkook with his other talon, shielding the prince from the wind and bright sunlight.

"Do you want to shower first or second?"

"It's whatever."

"Can you go first, then? Because I'll take a bath."

"Sure."

Kookie climbs up the stairs and Revna turns her head to peer at Taetae.

"Revna wants out."

"No clue what you—" Taetae sneezes. It's loud. "Said."

Revna glides toward the door and shoves her head against the door. ***"Revna wants to go out."***

Taetae opens the door. "Where do you go at night every time?"

"Revna can't tell." Revna moves *up up up* Taetae's leg.

Revna likes that Taetae doesn't reject her anymore. Taetae always gives her lots of food and Revna *loves* food. Taetae also always lets Revna sleep on his lap now. Sometimes he grumbles but he never says no. Kookie says that Taetae is 'whipped' but she's confused. Taetae doesn't look like whipped cream? Revna knows because she had eaten a lot of whipped cream one day when Cute Dragon had been baking.

Revna has been tired for the past couple weeks.

She has too many nightmares. It's scary. There's always blood everywhere in them and also a gray mist. Revna is sometimes in a cave in her dreams too and she's lonely because when she calls out for Kookie he never answers. Thankfully Revna wakes up after those bad dreams and she's okay because she's in bed with Kookie and Taetae.

She hasn't told Kookie because she doesn't want to bother him. He's busy with the sickness. Revna hopes no dragon she likes has the sickness. Revna would be really sad if so.

"You're going out or what? I've gotta shower and then I want to visit Jimin real quick."

Revna curls around Taetae's shoulders. She bumps snout with him. ***"Taetae kiss."***

"I'm closing the door if you don't leave."

"Taetae kiss!" She bites his nose. ***"Taetae is mean."***

“I’m not mean.”

Taetae understood!

Revna dances, her body undulating and unable to contain all the happiness that radiates from her. Taetae is beginning to speak her language more. It’s only a few words but he still understands some. Revna is trying to teach the word ‘kiss’ but Taetae is a bit dumb sometimes, she thinks and snickers to herself.

“Taetae! Kiss!” Revna clicks her tongue and repeatedly bumps Taetae’s nose with her snout.
“Kiss? Like Kookie.”

Taehyung frowns. “You want, like, a kiss?”

“Yes! Kiss! Maybe Taetae is smart.”

“I’m not kissing you. Get out.”

“Taetae is so, so mean.” Revna lowers her head with a sad noise. It usually works.

“I’m not.”

“Yes. Taetae is mean. Taetae is the most mean.”

“I don’t know what you just said at the end but I’ll assume you called me an asshole from context clues.”

Revna erupts into a series of hisses as she laughs. ***“Taetae will hunt with Revna?”***

“What?”

“Taetae.” Revna shows the venom that drips down her fangs then she makes a biting motion.
“Taetae and Revna can hunt together.”

“You want to kill me?”

Taetae is so dumb…

Revna rolls her head.

“Come on. The cold is getting inside and I just finished warming up the house.”

“Taetae kiss Revna?”

Taetae peers over his shoulders then he looks at Revna. He glances behind again for a brief moment. Then Taetae presses a kiss on Revna’s snout and she doesn’t get to peck him back before he grabs her and rests her on the floor. “The shit you both make me do,” Taetae grumbles and gently nudges Revna with his foot.

Revna attacks!

She nibbles Taetae's toes! He curses and jerks away. Revna dissolves into laughter at how ticklish Taetae’s toes are.

“Fucking brat,” Taetae says and closes the door behind Revna when she exits the house.

Slither, slither, slither.

Revna out, out!

It takes some time to find one in the forest but when Revna does, she immediately bites down on the stem and eats the black flower. Revna thinks they’re called nixes? She’s not sure and she didn’t ask Kookie again because Kookie said it’s bad to eat them.

Revna is good, but she had been curious one night when she had gone hunting.

She had passed by a bouquet of nixes and the black bell had smelled so good! Revna had not meant to disobey Kookie. But Revna had still been hungry after eating a rabbit. So she had eaten the black flower and it had tasted as yummy as it had smelled.

Revna really wants to tell Kookie about it but she hasn’t yet. She wants to keep eating the flower and she knows Kookie won’t allow her to anymore if he’s aware of what she does at night.

So Revna keeps it secret. Kookie says it’s okay to have secrets because everyone has some.

She munches on the black bell and swallows it. She sways on the ground as she feels the flower dissolve in her tummy. It tickles a bit. Revna is always a little tired after eating the flower because of how full she feels, so she makes her way through the forest to nap somewhere at the foot of a tree.

“I need to talk to you,” Taehyung announces as he barges inside.

Jimin’s eyes narrow at him. “What do I gain in retu—”

Taehyung drops a paper bag, a waft of seasoned meat and soy sauce suffusing Jimin’s senses.

“Of course! Have a seat.” Jimin grabs the goods, not wasting a single second to wolf down the delicious food. “Wassup?”

“The Viper."

“What about him? You went to Amaris with him, no?”

“Yeah. Was useless for the most part but that’s not the problem.”

“What is?”

“There’s…” Taehyung plops down on an armchair while Jimin lounges on the couch. “There’s something about him.”

“There’s been something about Jungkook since the very first day you met him.”

“It’s different now,” Taehyung says. “It’s— One night we— I mean. And then… You know.” He waves. “And since that night… Yeah.”

Cheeks bulging around a mouthful of rice, Jimin springs up like a rod. “Gonna have to explain that one to me again ‘cause right now you’re making it sound like you and Jungkook got frisky.”

Taehyung's nose curls. “We did *not.”* He rubs his palms up and down his face then cards them through his hair, pushing his bang on his crown. “We were in my bed. Because he wanted to sleep in my bed.”

“And you said yes?”

Taehyung shrugs.

“Whipped.”

“Shut up.”

“What happened after that?”

“I just…” Taehyung’s fingers drums on the armrests, his knee jumping up and down, then he rises to his feet. “No. Whatever.”

“Ah ah ah ah ah.” Jimin stops Taehyung with his foot, his toes gripping the pants. “No chickening out. Tell me.”

Taehyung smacks Jimin’s foot away before slumping back on his seat. “He was… He’s— I touched him. Not like *that*,” he clarifies when Jimin wiggles a brow. “I touched his nape and I don’t know how to explain but it’s like it, uh, awakened a— A curiosity in me.”

"About Jungkook?"

"Yeah."

The discussion has grown a hundred times more interesting than his food and so Jimin places his bowl on the coffee table to lay down on his stomach on the sofa, arms folded over the edge and chin propped on them while he peers at Taehyung. “In what way are you curious about him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to continue to be curious about him?”

“I don’t know…”

“You can’t reply ‘I don’t know’ forever!”

“I can because I don’t fucking know!”

“You’re not even thinking about the answers. You know them, or you can figure them out, but you’re not taking the time to do so,” Jimin remarks and Taehyung emits a petulant scoff. “So, asking again: why are you curious about Jungkook? Don’t reply now. Think about it.”

Taehyung thinks about it.

For over an hour.

One of Jimin's eyes twitches as he waits for the response. When it finally arrives, he considers assassinating Taehyung right then and there.

"Because he's fun."

" *Please* ," Jimin starts and pinches the bridge of his nose, "don't tell me that it took you an hour to come down to this conclusion."

"Fuck off. I wasn't done. He's interesting too."

"In what way?"

"I d—" Taehyung averts his gaze when it meets Jimin's glare. "He's so unpredictable."

"How so?"

"You weren't there at the council but he was so damn smart, Jimin. I've never seen anything like it," Taehyung begins, his posture relaxing as he speaks.

"So what? You like his intelligence?"

"Yeah. He's strong. Fierce. And loyal."

"You sure love loyalty," Jimin says in an obnoxiously crooning voice.

"I do. I like that he's loyal to me. Is that weird?"

"No, because no matter what you may say, you at least appreciate him as a friend. And you're a dragonborn."

"I guess… Aside from you and the rest of the family, I never knew someone could be loyal to me in such ways."

"You have to reciprocate it."

"I have."

"Yeah, in case you defying the Council isn't enough of a hint," Jimin chuckles. "Was it strange to show loyalty for a human?"

"Not as much as it should have. It was fine because it was him, you know? It was just… natural. I didn't consciously think about it. It just happened."

"The fact that you aren't scared of Jungkook anymore is doing wonders for you two's relationship," Jimin remarks and Taehyung nods. "I'm glad it does. Jungkook deserves the attention and care you've been giving him. You better continue to do because if you don't—"

"He's pretty."

Jimin breaks into a coughing fit when his saliva goes down the wrong pipe. "W—What?"

“He’s beautiful,” Taehyung begins and does not stop, his face etched into a deep, pensive frown. “I don’t know why I never noticed this before. I mean I did notice but I never *properly* looked. And today we went to Amaris and he was wearing those clothes or whatever the fuck those were but his back was naked and he had those dangling shoulder jewelry that were all… All shiny and the sun was reflecting on them and on his face and I wanted to paint him so badly and you know I haven’t painted in years but he— I was itching to paint. I still am. Everything is still so crystal clear in my head that I can draw him from memory. 'think I will 'cause it won’t leave my mind. It’s so fucking annoying, Chim. It’s just… He’s so damn pretty it’s stupid, seriously, like… You’re pretty. I’m pretty. I’m fucking beautiful but he—” Taehyung shakes his head with a heavy sigh. “Anyway. I can admit when someone is pretty but then I move on from it the next second. Yet the way he looked this afternoon won’t leave my mind.”

Jimin blinks a couple times, trying to process the rant as best he can. “If you ask me, you sound enamored."

“Good thing I didn't fucking ask. Have you gone mad?” Taehyung glowers after venting about how gorgeous Jungkook is for a good, uninterrupted minute. “I'm just— I’m just *looking* for once. Objectively. He’s so beautiful *and* smart and I really want to paint how he looked today.” He rubs a spot between his brows as he closes his eyes. “Everything’s making me curious about him. Do you have any clue of how touch-starved he is? Which makes sense with the upbringing he had. So he’s hyper responsive, right?”

“Right,” Jimin echoes with a solemn voice, dizzied from the whiplashes of the conversation.

“And I can't help but wonder… How would he react to this or that touch? From *me.* Because it seems that he’s like this with me only? And you know I don’t touch people aside from pats on the back or the occasional hug. I’m not tactile, right?”

“Right. I know that.”

“Right. And with him I’m curious about how his body will react to me, right?”

“Right, right.”

“Isn’t it weird?”

“It’s not. It’s just unexpected because I’ve never seen you this interested in someone.”

“I suppose.”

“How does it feel?” Jimin wonders and he sits up on his knees to cuddle up in the corner of the couch. He must not hide well enough the longing in his tone because Taehyung peers at him with understanding.

“It’s pretty nice. Are you curious about someone?”

Jimin rests his chin on his knees. He picks at his sockets and says “Yoongi.”

“The warlock? Are you two messing around?”

“No. It’d be a clusterfuck, we’ve been over this.”

“You can if you want to, Chim. Forget what I said at the wedding, that was a while ago, and things have changed. If you’re curious about him, then maybe you should explore it.”

“It’s scary.” Jimin's stomach already churns at the sole thought of it.

“You know I’m here, and you also know that if he hurts you in any way, I’ll blast his ass.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jimin chuckles. “I’m a mess, Taehyung. I doubt he’ll want to deal with it.”

“He’s been protecting a necromancer and a basilisk for years. He’s used to messes.”

“Good point,” Jimin begrudgingly concedes.

“Damn right it is. You said the Prince deserves attention and care, and so do you. If the warlock can give you this, then go for it.”

“What about you and Jungkook?”

“What about us? It’s not like you and Yoongi.”

Is it not, though? Jimin thinks to himself but does not say out loud. “Ah yeah. Right. My bad.”

“Right. All of that to say that he’s gorgeous and it pisses me off because he doesn’t seem to realize it. Want to know what pisses me off even more? Seohyung. What a fucking bitch. Wanted to snap her neck earlier. She’s horrible.”

“Dohyun kind of horrible?”

“She’s worse than him,” Taehyung says and Jimin makes a sound of surprise. “The nightmare with the man with the scent only lasted for half a year. It was terrible, but it was brief compared to what Jungkook endured, and mostly just violence.”

Taehyung does not seem to notice the way his eyes take a golden hue. Jimin hides his smile against his knees.

“But Seohyung… She abused Jungkook since his birth. She even said he’s whorish because he was displaying his shoulders and back, this vile pig.”

“I’ll have to go out and buy some clothes with him,” Jimin muses, impossibly fond of the bratty prince and eager to help Jungkook be more comfortable in his own skin. “I’m guessing Jungkook managed to calm you down considering that Seohyung is still in one piece?”

“I broke her arm,” Taehyung grins something wolfish before high fiving Jimin. “He did calm me down though. Like after the fight with the Council. No clue how he does it. 'Cause I'm a chaos dragon, you know. It’s difficult for me to subdue when I’m pissed off, but Jungkook manages to make it happen somehow.”

Probably because Taehyung is a bit of a temperamental puppy with Jungkook: a little dumb, a little immature, highly protective, all bark *and* bite but easily appeased if given the proper words or if restrained with the accurate leash — in this case, Jungkook’s touch and rationale.

“It’s good. You need a husband like Jungkook.”

“I don’t need a husband."

“You know what I mean, stupid idiot. You better be good to him too. Give him affection and all that jazz. He clearly loves it.”

“Yeah."

“You’re giving it to him?”

Taehyung makes a face that can only be described as a shy, peeved pout. He folds a leg on the armchair’s seat, concealing himself a bit from Jimin’s hawk eyes. Then he nods, and Jimin shoves down the urge to poke at Taehyung’s sudden bashfulness.

“I try to. I actually do, Chim,” Taehyung quietly confesses. “I never try that kinda thing. It’s strange.”

“Do you like it? Being affectionate with Jungkook?”

Taehyung does not answer right away, but when he does minutes later, it’s with a barely noticeable nod.

“But do you like it?”

“It’s weird.”

“Why? Jungkook likes it, you like it, and this is all that matters. So?”

Taehyung fidgets with his wedding ring. “I guess I like it, yeah. I don’t know why. He wants some specific loaves of bread that should have been offered to him since forever—”

What?

“—and he’s slowly learning that he can and should ask for those loaves—”

Loaves of bread?

“—but it’s crazy to me how insecure he is to ask for them because of how worried he is of being a burden when he’s asking for the bare minimum."

Why bread?

“But I’m beginning to give him those loaves, you know? It’s not a burden at all and the thing is, I thought I’d be annoyed of making those loaves but I’m not. At all,” Taehyung says but as far as Jimin knows, Taehyung is a terrible baker. “If anything, I kinda like it? I think. Maybe. I mean, I don’t mind.”

“So. Huuuh,” Jimin trails off for a moment, choosing to discard the whole baking aspect of what Taehyung has confessed. “You like being affectionate with Jungkook.”

“Stop making it sound so damn weird.”

“I’m afraid that anything remotely close to acknowledging your feelings and emotions will always sound weird to you.”

“Fuck you.” Taehyung, like the man-child that he is, crosses his arms over his chest then slumps down his seat and proceeds to sulk.

“Also, if you’re curious about Jungkook's sensitivity, you could try to touch him with something other than your hands.”

“How else am I supposed to touch him?” Taehyung frowns with a repulsed moue. “With my feet?”

“I’m talking about your mouth, you absolute buffoon.”

“That’s disgusting."

“I know you don’t mean it.”

“What will my mouth change anyway? It’s just another part of my body.”

Jimin levels Taehyung with a deadpan stare. “Are you really this dense?”

“I’m not fucking dense,” Taehyung says and Jimin reneges his teasing at the temper that rises in Taehyung. “I don’t understand.”

They never discussed this type of subject aside from a few short exchanges here and there and so Jimin says ” Can I ask you something?” When Taehyung utters a *‘Yeah’* , Jimin continues. “Have you ever tried to properly define your sexuality?”

“What does it have to do with the Viper?”

“I’m curious.”

“I know I’m asexual. Or I at least never felt any sexual attraction toward anyone and never wanted to have sex,” Taehyung says, “and I’ve never been romantically interested in someone nor fell in love.”

“Sexual and romantic attraction — sexuality in general — is something that is very fluid and can be quite complex sometimes,” Jimin explains. “It can change over time if you meet the right person.”

“How so?”

“For example, one day you might stumble on someone for who you feel sexual and/or romantic attraction,” Jimin says and he watches as the gears turns in Taehyung’s mind while his own are slowly understanding the newfound bond that may be forming between Taehyung and Jungkook.

“What would that mean?”

“It could mean you're demisexual, rather than asexual and aromantic,” Jimin says and further elaborates at Taehyung’s mute inquiry, “meaning that you only feel attraction for someone only once you've formed a close bond with them."

“I highly doubt I’ll meet someone for whom I’ll develop that kind of feeling.”

Jimin musters his best rendition of The Understanding Smile Of A Good Friend to refrain himself from gripping Taehyung by the shoulders and shaking him like an unsealed can of paint. “That’s something you can figure out *if* you want to. In the meantime, you should kiss Jungkook.”

“I’m not kissing him, what the fuck is wrong with you.”

“I don’t mean on the mouth. Imagine how he would react if you were to touch his nape with your lips?” Jimin says and internally cackles when Taehyung’s gaze has a distant look in them. “You’re thinking about it.”

“You’re pissing me off. I’m leaving.” Taehyung springs up to march toward the exit door.

“Thank you for the food! And remember that it is more than okay to want to make out with your husband! Oh, and stop overthinking everything and just enjoy yourself, dumbass!”

Taehyung flips Jimin the bird then slams the door shut.

Jimin waits until Taehyung has shifted and flown away to say “You can come out.”

Woobin climbs down the stairs, his steps cautious. “He didn’t notice I’m here?”

“Nah. He was too lost in his mind to pay attention.”

Woobin sighs and occupies the chair Taehyung had. He looks tense, understandably so since Jimin has taken him in after Taehyung’s fight with the Council. “Father will come looking for me soon.”

“Do you want to go back with him?”

Woobin shakes his head.

“Then you won’t. You’re staying here until we find you a house.”

“I don’t have any money, Jimin.”

“I know, and that’s why you’ll be working for me. I’ve always needed an assistant.” Jimin rummages through the bowls of food, giving one to his brother. “Eat this.”

“Thank you,” Woobin mumbles and takes the offering.

Jimin peers at his little brother, the remorse and guilt coalescing within him, one that he hopes to fix now.

“Taehyung?!” Jungkook says who had *still* been bathing when Taehyung had come back inside their house.

“What?” Taehyung shouts back, installed at their coffee table where he works on a map.

“Can I wear one of your shirts?!”

Taehyung scowls at his quill. “No!” He does not have to wait for long before the sound of a door opening and the pitter-patter of naked feet echo on the second floor, growing louder until a frowning and shirtless Jungkook appears at the bottom of the stairs.

“Why not?”

“You’ve stolen five of my sweaters. Probably more.”

“Exactly, so what is a shirt gonna change?”

“ *Everything.* ”

Jungkook rolls his eyes and he sits next to Taehyung to tug on his sleeve. “Come on.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Come ooon. There’s this shirt you wear that I like. The super baggy one that nearly reaches your knees. It kinda looks like a dress.”

“The black one?” Taehyung stupidly says when his wardrobe is brimming with black shirts.

“Yes, Taehyung. The black one,” Jungkook says with a patronizing tone that Taehyung reprimands with a zap.

“Sass me again and I won’t bother considering lending it to you.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Jungkook chuckles and squeezes Taehyung’s arm. “Please? I won’t steal it this time,” he assures and Taehyung curls a brow. “Even if I do, it's fine because you’ve got plenty of other shirts.”

Taehyung really does.

He pretends to mull over his decision for a minute before saying “Whatever. It’s somewhere in my closet.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”

Jungkook makes a noise — of happiness, Taehyung guesses — and he smacks a resounding kiss on Taehyung’s cheek before springing up and running off. “Thank you!”

Taehyung glares at the spot where Jungkook has vanished and distractedly wipes his cheek. He drums his fingers on the table. He waits for a door to close before smelling the back of his hand.

Strawberry.

Taehyung huffs, warm, and resumes his work.

Jungkook walks back down some time later, rummaging through the kitchen behind the counter and preparing himself some hot chocolate. Taehyung glances up. The black shirt is draped over Jungkook’s form, the collar distended and displaying one of the shoulders.

Taehyung continues to draw the borders of an island, however something catches his attention in his peripheral vision a moment later. He peers up again amidst a sip of his own beverage.

Taehyung inhales and the gulp of lemony, soothing tea slides down the wrong pipe. He coughs and chokes, waving off Jungkook's question of concern. Jungkook rounds the kitchen counter that, again, does not conceal the bottom half of his attire.

"I was reading about Kaiya and apparently the guardians, while they are dragonborns, are always in their dragon form, never in their human one," Jungkook says while Taehyung sniffles and clears his throat. "So it might be comp—"

"What the fuck are you wearing."

Jungkook freezes on his spot, his back to Taehyung. "Your shirt."

Yeah.

Jungkook is wearing Taehyung's shirt.

Taehyung's shirt *only* .

Taehyung peers at Jungkook's naked legs and feet.

He blinks once.

"You said it's fine to… To wear what I want to wear, even if it's—" Jungkook falls quiet, his stance stiff. He leaves his cup on the counter with a thud then he marches out of the kitchen and climbs up to the second floor.

A door slams shut seconds later.

"Shit."

Taehyung scrambles to his feet but as he does he accidentally spills the jar of ink on his papers. He curses and discards the mess for now to make his way toward the staircase. He halts in front of the bathroom door that he rattles his knuckles against. "Viper?"

Some sounds erupt from behind the door and when the latter swings open it's to the Prince having changed into one of his usual pajamas.

"What?"

"Why did you change?" Taehyung frowns.

"Because— Because."

"I was surprised, that's all."

Jungkook averts his eyes, casting them low on the floor. "It's fine."

"You can wear it. I don't mind. If I did, I wouldn't have agreed."

“Yes but I—” Jungkook teeth visibly grit, the muscles of his jaw shifting under his skin. “S’fine. Forget it.”

“It’s obviously not fine."

Jungkook takes a step back. He lowers on the ground, his thighs pressed against his chest and arms tightly wrapped around his legs.

Taehyung crouches in front of Jungkook, respecting the distance the Prince has put between them. “You can tell me,” Taehyung says and angles his head to meet Jungkook’s gaze. “You know I won’t hurt you, right?”

“I know but it’s… I can't help it,” Jungkook says, mouth tucked against his knees, “the forged compliance. I had to be like this. To survive. I always had to listen to people, be aware of everyone’s moods so that I could avoid angering them. I know you won’t hurt me. I *know* that, but I…"

“When people ask something of you, do you do it because you’re scared?” Taehyung wonders as he lessens his voice.

Jungkook tentatively surveys Taehyung before nodding. “It depends though.”

“On what?”

“Who asks. If you, Jimin, Namjoon or anyone close to me asks for something, I— I mean I’ll still obey, but not necessarily because I’m scared. I’ll just do it even if I don’t want to because it’s reflexive to say yes. Although sometimes I do want to do it.”

“Are you happy when you comply with what someone asks of you?”

Jungkook grows still. His mouth parts then closes. He seems lost in his own head for a moment, his gaze far away. A blurriness veils Jungkook’s eyes as he blankly stares ahead. “It depends,” he eventually says, his timber strained. “Usually no. I think? I never— I never asked myself that question.”

“You should.” Taehyung clasps his hands together to repress the impulse to touch Jungkook’s face. “Before doing something for someone, you should ask yourself if… if it’ll make you happy to do it. And if the answer is no, then you shouldn’t comply with the request.”

Jungkook nods and when he does a couple tears slide down his cheeks as he presses his trembling lips against his arms. “I’m learning that, but it still scares me sometimes.”

“But you’re learning, that’s good.”

“It’s not always a no,” Jungkook says, his gaze drifting between Taehyung and the floor.

“How so?”

“Since I left Amaris, when your family asks me things, I’m happy when I do it sometimes, like when Junhyun asked me to cook with him. It made me happy. And… I like doing things for you."

Taehyung pauses.

“At the very beginning, and I really mean only for the first few days, I was complying with what you’d ask because I was wary of you, especially because of how Seungwon had been with me,” Jungkook confesses. “It didn’t last for long at all, I promise,” he adds, because he must have picked up on the way Taehyung has tensed. “You rarely ask things of me to begin with. You usually phrase things in a way that gives me a choice, but the few times you do ask me to do something, I’m happy to comply, like when you ask me to fetch something for you, for example. I like doing it. It makes me feel good. Like I’m doing good. And I feel safe.”

“You’re doing good whether you obey me or not, Viper. You–"

“I know, that was just an example. Although there were a few things you asked me to do that I didn't want to obey, like when you’d tell me to go to sleep while I still wanted to speak with you.”

“I need you to promise me something. Only if you’d like doing so,” Taehyung quickly adds.

Jungkook chuckles. “What is it?”

“If I ever ask something of you that you don't want to do for any reason, don’t do it, please."

Jungkook’s gaze softens.

“You can just tell me. I won’t get angry. I won’t hit you. I won’t lock you in a bathroom. I won’t do any of that," Taehyung assures. "Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes,” Jungkook says with a nod.

“Yes? What else?”

Jungkook scrapes the nail of his thumb on his wedding ring as he contemplates his answer. “It makes me happy to promise this.”

“Good,” Taehyung says with a small curve of his lips. “Can you go outside and sit on the grass for an hour?”

“Huh?”

“I’d like for you to do that. Right now.”

“I—” Jungkook deeply inhales and exhales, then he says “I don’t want to do it.”

“So you won’t do it?”

Jungkook shakes his head, looking a tad confused. “I won’t.”

Taehyung hesitates for a moment, and hopes it won't mess everything up.

When he raises his hand, the motion is measured and tentative, and he’s relieved to see that Jungkook does not brace or flinch away.

Taehyung isn’t certain on where to touch. Jungkook is curled in on himself so it doesn’t leave a lot of options. Patting the arm would be too awkward and impersonal, and Jungkook is too far for Taehyung to curl his hand around Jungkook’s nape.

So Taehyung settles on the head. It’s still an unfamiliar land, uncharted and intricate, but it is one that he has explored in the past, particularly during that one night.

Taehyung’s attention is riveted on Jungkook, ready to pick up on any sign of discomfort. When Taehyung catches none, he allows his fingers to slowly card through Jungkook’s bangs to sprawl on the crown.

“Good,” Taehyung rasps. Whispers, really, and he punctuates the word with a scratch on the scalp.

Jungkook’s body tenses but Taehyung knows that it’s due to the shudder that runs through Jungkook's form and follows the same pattern it had at the library, where Jungkook mellows and sags on his spot right after, his lids fluttering shut.

Taehyung drags his fingertips lower, cups the side of Jungkook’s head and his hand tangles and untangles through the length of Jungkook's hair when Jungkook tilts toward the touch in a request for more.

Jungkook holds onto Taehyung’s wrist as he nestles the inner side of Taehyung’s forearm. “It’s good that I said no?”

“It’s good you spoke your mind freely.”

“It feels nice when I do,” Jungkook says with a smile that scrunches his nose. “It’s one of the reasons why I like being around you. Because I can be myself.”

“Yeah?” Taehyung curls a lock around his thumb before kneading the pulp along the temple.

“Mhm."

“Then you should do it more often.”

“I’ll try to,” Jungkook mumbles. “It’ll take some time.”

“Patience is a thing.”

“You’re not patient though.”

“I am with you,” Taehyung easily admits.

Jungkook lets go of Taehyung to bury his mouth against his drawn up knees but it does nothing to conceal his smile. Taehyung pulls back from Jungkook too — reluctantly, to his surprise.

“There’s someone I know who I think would be good for you if you visit her," Taehyung starts. "I still do every now and then. She’s a dragonborn. She listens to you, gives you advice. She helps you understand things about yourself and all that. She’s specialized in this work field. In healing the mind.”

“I’ve never heard of this."

“She has an arcanic oath in her house that forces her to keep secret all that is said to her. So it’s safe. Anything you’ll confide in her will remain between the two of you.”

“You used to see her?”

“Yeah,” Taehyung says and peers down. “About my arcane and the impact it has on me, about my anger issues that were especially disastrous at the time, about the troubles I had with socializing and— And I went to see her after Kija too.”

“Did it help?”

“A lot. I was a terrible child.”

“That I can believe,” Jungkook says with a teasing smile. “I think I’d like to try.”

“Yes?”

Jungkook nods. “Will you fly me there?”

“Of course. I won’t stay with you in the tree but I’ll be outside until you’re done with the meeting, if that’s what you want.”

As Taehyung expects it, Jungkook perks up at the mention of a tree, and if the Prince had a tail, it would wag behind him. “A tree?”

“Mhm,” Taehyung says, biting back a smile. “It’s pretty. It’s on a hill high up and far from habitation. You’d like it.”

Taehyung doesn’t say more and neither does Jungkook who appears to be contemplating the offer. Taehyung peers at his wedding ring, rolling the band around his finger. He mulls over the question for a small lull before he blurts it out.

“Why did you change clothes?”

Jungkook seems as timid as Taehyung feels but he still replies, his words curled around a lisp. “Because I didn’t like how you reacted.”

“I wasn’t— I didn’t mean to sound…mean.”

“If you don’t mean to sound like that, then you have to make some effort to make sure you don’t, Taehyung. I liked the shirt on me but the way you talked to me when you saw me made me feel like Seohyung said. You sounded accusatory.”

Fuck.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung says. “Seeing you like this caught me off guard.”

“I was just wearing it,” Jungkook mumbles through pursed lips.

“Yeah. Half naked.”

“I wasn’t half naked.”

“You kinda were. Did you even have underwear on?”

“Of course?!” Jungkook says, a rosy tint coloring his neck and soon his cheeks. He smacks Taehyung's arm. “You’re— Oh my God,” he mutters and drops his forehead on his knees.

Taehyung muffles his chuckles against his palm. “You can wear the shirt again, I don’t care. It’s winter though,” he adds and awfully sounds like he *does* care.

“You warmed up the house a lot, so I was feeling hot. That’s why I didn’t put any pants on.”

Oh.

Right.

Taehyung clears his throat. “Anyway. You should put it back on if you want to.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Do you want it on?” Taehyung asks and Jungkook eventually nods. “Alright.”

Taehyung straightens up and winces when his knees crack after crouching in the same position for a while. He grabs Jungkook’s arm that he lightly tugs on and Jungkook complies as he rises to his feet and steps closer to Taehyung.

“Can I come in?”

A flash of surprise washes over Jungkook’s face. “You can."

Taehyung enters the bathroom and closes the door behind him. He and Jungkook are alone in the house, but it still gives them a sense of privacy that Taehyung needs at the moment. “Where is it?”

Jungkook points at the wooden stool next to the sink’s counter.

Taehyung goes to retrieve the black shirt then stands before Jungkook. “Can I remove your top?”

“Uh?”

“Can I?” Taehyung waits for an answer, and when it's given to him in the form of a timid nod, Taehyung says “Sure?”

“Mhm."

Taehyung shuffles a little closer, until wafts of a familiar floral, grim scent suffuses his senses. He grabs the hem of Jungkook’s pajama top that he tugs higher up along the ribs then passes over the shoulders and head when Jungkook lifts his arms. Taehyung unceremoniously tosses the pajama on the hamper.

“You didn’t have to throw it like that.”

“And you don’t have to complain, yet here we are.”

“Shut up,” Jungkook says with a pinch on Taehyung’s arm.

Taehyung slides the black shirt down Jungkook’s head, first bunching it up at the neck then aiding Jungkook pass his arms through the holes of the sleeves.

It shouldn't be this natural.

Dressing someone up like this.

Not only this but also helping Jungkook *remove* clothes. It's eons away from when Taehyung had selected Jungkook's outfit, an occurrence that Taehyung admits to have quite enjoyed — although not a single soul would hear it from him.

There's just something about it that Taehyung likes.

Perhaps it's because Jungkook has chosen to let Taehyung do this in the first place when he could have refused. Perhaps it's the mutual trust: the fact that Jungkook knows Taehyung won't hurt him in any way, while Taehyung knows Jungkook will tell him if he ever unknowingly wrongs the Prince.

Perhaps it's because of how in tune their movements are, where Taehyung does not need to speak a word for Jungkook to understand, like when Taehyung folds up the shirt's sleeve for Jungkook so that they don't get in Jungkook's way.

Or maybe the reason is a little less convoluted.

Maybe Taehyung simply likes taking care of Jungkook.

"You really chose the most tattered shirt," Taehyung notes to divert his mind from the bewildering epiphany. "It has holes, burnt marks and ink stains everywhere." He readjusts the shirt around Jungkook's form, more particularly the loosened collar to make sure that it properly covers Jungkook's shoulders.

"I like it. It means you wear it often."

"I do. I used to," Taehyung corrects with a quirk of his brow.

Jungkook ducks his head with a smile.

Taehyung lifts the hem of the long shirt with a hand while his other one loosely holds the band of the pajama pants. "Can I?"

"Yes."

"Not naked?"

"Stop it!" Jungkook blushes and punches Taehyung's arm.

Taehyung internally chuckles. He crouches in front of Jungkook as he begins to pull down the pajama pants then wordlessly taps Jungkook's ankle. With a hand braced on Taehyung's shoulder, Jungkook lifts his foot so that Taehyung can fully remove this leg of the pants. They do the same for the second leg: a tap, a lift, a palm on the shoulder and soon the pants are gone.

It really should be awkward, yet Taehyung can't help but find this moment comforting.

The intimacy that envelops them isn't lost on Taehyung. It's one he has never experienced with someone else, and if his shyness that Jungkook echoes through a demure smile is any given, Jungkook's thoughts must have followed a similar trail.

"I like it," Jungkook says, his voice barely above a murmur.

"Like what?"

“This,” Jungkook says, even if Taehyung already knew the answer. “I think you like it too.”

Taehyung surveys Jungkook, unsure on what to reply. He opts to nod. It’s easier than speaking it out loud, and it suffices for now because Jungkook tilts his head with a look Taehyung can only describe as fond.

“Thank you,” Jungkook says with a squeeze on Taehyung’s arm.

“Don't thank me for that.”

Jungkook chuckles, a hand raising to his face. “Okay.”

Taehyung draws an appraising look of Jungkook’s form swathed by the shirt, and he thinks on what to say to make up for his earlier remark. “You look good,” he blurts out and startles himself. "In it. In my shirt. *The* shirt. You look good in the shirt."

By the Elders.

Taehyung coughs in his fist instead of doing something manic like smashing his head against the sink.

He hadn't meant for it to come out so— So weird and *real.*

Taehyung grabs Jungkook by the shoulder to turn him around and hastily change the subject. “What were you saying about Kaiya?”

Taehyung wipes a rag on the table after cleaning it from the ink mess. He glances at Jungkook.

Jungkook is munching on some biscuits he's just finished baking. He's navigating through the kitchen and the living room, seemingly comfortable in the sole piece of clothing he's wearing: Taehyung's back shirt.

And a pair of underwear.

Jungkook passes by a bay window to climb the stairs, humming to himself, his naked feet padding on the floor.

Taehyung squints at the large bay windows forming part of the walls of the house's first floor. The curtains are bundled on the ends of the rails, meaning that anyone onlooker can peer inside the house if they were to pass by the abode. Not that anyone is outside to begin with.

Taehyung still stands. He draws the living room and kitchen's curtains shut before sitting back down at the coffee table, more relaxed now.

Jungkook appears downstairs a minute later, armed with two pillows that he throws on Taehyung’s right. “I was reading during my bath, and according to the tales, anyone who tried to enter Kaiya after the Great War died,” he says and folds his legs under him as he settles next to Taehyung. “As in, the forest itself kills the visitors.”

“Heard about it too but we should be fine since Elder Miseon will join us.” Taehyung grumbles to himself when he begins to entirely redraw his map.

“I was wondering about her,” Jungkook starts.

Taehyung peers at him and stills when he notices how close Jungkook is to him, where less than a couple inches separate their bodies.

“She’s the one who… During Dohyun. She hurt you. But she officiated our wedding, and you and your family clearly trust her. She was pretending to be on Dohyun’s side, right?”

“Yeah, she was,” Taehyung confirms. “She knew there would be an auction, and that the man with the scent would take me there. So she gained time and his trust. Then the day of the auction, we drove away from the land riddled with runes, meaning that she and I could turn to out dragon self and then— Then you saw.”

“I did.” Jungkook opens his book to a spread of two dried flowers with annotations marked on the sides. “Revna’s outside?”

“She said something with my name and the word ‘kill’ or something like that, so either she wanted to assassinate me in my sleep or I misunderstood.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter. “She probably told you she wants to hunt with you.”

“She does?”

“She loves spending time with you. Turns out you’re not such a horrible company,” Jungkook teases.

Taehyung doesn’t bother huffing in petulance, too busy biting back his growing grin because the basilisk wants to hang out with him.

“You’ll hunt with her?”

“Yeah.”

Jungkook snorts. “Whipped.”

Taehyung zaps Jungkook’s cheek. “What about the thing you told me with the shrill?”

“I still don’t understand,” Jungkook sobers up. “She was affected by it, but how and why? It had seemed to only work on dragonborns. Maybe it was effective on her because she’s a snake? And technically dragons are reptiles.”

Taehyung levels Jungkook with a glare.

“Technically,” Jungkook says. “So it could be why. It affects reptiles.”

“It still hurts me in my human form,” Taehyung counters. “Plus if it affects reptiles, then the lizard familiar would have been pained by the shrill as well.”

“Unless it’s immune to its own songs.”

“Unless that.”

“And even in your human form you’re still part reptile.”

“Can you stop using the word reptile,” Taehyung mutters. “And you don’t even know what a basilisk truly is. The sigil on her head is gibberish.”

“But it’s the same sigil seen on basilisks in books.”

“Yes. In myths. So fictitious gibberish,” Taehyung says. “I should ask Minsoo about it. He may know something.”

Jungkook's head darts in Taehyung's direction. He looks oddly eager. “Could I join? I’d love to see him again.”

Taehyung’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

“Because he’s your grandfather and you clearly love him a lot,” Jungkook says with an irked sigh. “I want to get to know him, if he lets me.”

“Don’t take it to heart if he’s an ass.”

“I won’t. I rarely do. Even when I’m thrown in the sky like when Woobin attacked the cart,” Jungkook snickers. “This sure had set the tone of my arrival back then.”

“He learned his lesson at least. Kinda,” Taehyung says. “Woobin is at Jimin’s house."

Jimin had revealed to Jungkook and Namjoon the nature of his relationship with Woobin after the fight with the council. Namjoon had been surprised, while Jungkook had only replied with a *'That explains a lot'* that still leaves Taehyung confused because how the fuck had the Prince also figured that out?

“Really?”

“Yeah. I said nothing but I smelled him when I visited Jimin earlier,” Taehyung says and pins Jungkook with a warning look when a sly smile begins to paint his lips. “I think he’ll be living with Jimin for some time, so brace yourself. We'll be haunted by his ugly face.”

“Woobin is very handsome though.”

Taehyung musters the most repulsed, outraged expression known to dragonkind. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I said what I said. He’s handsome and you know it too mister ‘I can admit when someone is pretty’,” Jungkook jests. “Speaking of him, how come your parents didn’t adopt him too? Because they adopted Jimin, right?”

“Yes but nothing official. It was more of a consensual kidnapping. We did try to take Woobin with us but Woobin refused to," Taehyung explains. "He was young and I suppose that in spite of how Seungwon is, Woobin was still seeing him as his father and wanted his approval.”

“Yeah… I get that,” Jungkook quietly says. “Leaving is scary. It can be scarier than staying, and it's especially true for a child.”

“He left now, and so have you."

The two of them peer at each other.

Jungkook curls a hand around Taehyung’s wrist, his thumb brushing at the back of the hand before focusing back on his botany book. Taehyung says nothing when Jungkook keeps his hand on his right wrist. Taehyung still doesn’t speak a word when it impedes his drawing of the map and prompts him to write with his left hand instead of asking Jungkook to let go.

Taehyung really tries his best to remain concentrated on his work for the next hour and a half, however he’s *distracted.*

First is by the lullaby Jungkook hums whose tune is actually quite lovely. Then it’s by Revna who enters the house to sprawl in front of the fireplace and pass out there. Finally it’s by Jungkook himself, who may possibly be the worst distraction Taehyung has ever encountered in his entire life.

Jungkook is comfortable.

Really comfortable.

It shows because he doesn’t seem to care about the fact that he’s only wearing Taehyung’s shirt and a pair of underwear that sometimes peeks out when he draws his legs up or when he stretches, the black shirt then riding up his hip.

It’s not as though Taehyung has never seen a naked man before.

Not that Jungkook is naked.

Although Jungkook *is* half naked.

Elders.

My god, even.

The thing is that for Taehyung’s brain, it appears to be different whenever Jungkook is at the core of anything.

There’s an expanse of skin — Jungkook's thighs — that looks as delicate as the one Taehyung has touched on the nape or back and his mind stutters a bit because it's Jungkook's *thighs*. It's a body part that is a lot more personal that a fucking bony elbow. Not that Jungkook's thighs are bony. They're anything but that. They're toned and wide yet seem supple at the same time and why is Jungkook so damn ripped to begin with? To lift a damned pen? Read a book?

Useless is what it is.

Nevertheless, Jungkook is distracting, and Taehyung doesn’t understand why.

It’s stupid.

So what if he's half naked, who gives a shit, Taehyung broods. It's not like Jungkook is waving his dick around. It’s just skin. *No big deal*. Taehyung's seen plenty of naked men when he and his hunting squadron would bathe in a river. And, again, Jungkook is *not* naked.

But Jungkook really is half naked in the middle of their living room right next to Taehyung.

The sight of the bare thighs reminds Taehyung of two unrelated occurrences: 1) the day where Jimin had broken wood chopsticks with his asscheeks, 2) another day where Jimin had crushed a watermelon with his thighs.

Taehyung wonders if Jungkook cou—

Taehyung slams his cup on the table.

Jungkook startles. “What is wrong with you?”

“Was just thinking.”

“Oh.” Jungkook sounds and looks worried and a frown even etches his face as he rests a hand on Taehyung’s shoulder. “Be careful.”

Taehyung should zap Jungkook for the teasing but he can’t repress the laugh that tumbles out of his lips. “Fuck off.”

Jungkook joins him with chuckles of his own. “But you were saying?”

“Nothing.” Taehyung isn’t about to share with Jungkook where his thoughts have wandered. “Was really just thinking.”

“Well, don’t strain yourself too much, okay? Can’t have my husband’s brain shutting down so young.”

“Fucking brat."

“Yes, and you married that brat.”

Taehyung hums. “I did.”

A silence floats after this.

Taehyung looks up from where he’s delineating the island’s borders to survey Jungkook.

Jungkook has this look in his eyes again: happy and soft and *him.*

“What?”

“Does it bother you to have me as your husband?" Jungkook asks. "A human?”

The answer is easy.

“Not anymore.”

“And if you had the chance to swap me for a dragonborn that you know you would get along well with, would you?”

The question is odd to say the least, but Taehyung replies nonetheless. “No, I wouldn’t,” he says and Jungkook appears so shocked that Taehyung himself is bewildered. “Why are you so surprised about it?”

“Because… I don’t know.”

“You’re not too bad, Viper,” Taehyung says and focuses back on his task. It doesn’t last for long — *again* — because he ends up observing Jungkook less than a minute later.

The tips of Jungkook's fingers cover his mouth but his smile is still evident in the way his cheeks bunch up, eyes crinkling at the corner. His hair is tousled *just right*, devoid of any product, his bangs pushed back by a golden hair band adorned with diamonds and white pearls.

Because of course the Prince would have a hairband like this for his nightly loitering.

Taehyung tears his gaze away from Jungkook to continue the drawing of this *fucking island* but his attention is diverted once more, however by Jimin this time.

Taehyung can’t help but think back on the discussion he had with him.

Taehyung exhales through his nose. He rests his quill on the coffee table to lean back against the couch. He props an arm on the sofa’s seat, head cushioned in his palm, then he stares at the back of Jungkook’s head.

He can still see the vivid details of the shoulder jewelry, of their watery reflections on Jungkook’s face.

Taehyung already knows he’ll be visiting Vanae’s market tomorrow. He doesn’t want to, even less knowing why he has to go there in the first place, but he knows he'll still fly to it even if it’s with a glower and a slammed pouch of coins.

“You’re staring,” Jungkook idly comments.

“I know.”

Jungkook’s shoulders lift around a small sound of amusement. “What are you thinking about?”

“You."

Jungkook jolts, as if hit by a zap of lightning. His neck becomes a little rosy and so do the tips of his ears as he hunches a bit on himself. “Y—You’re way too honest for my good.”

Why is Jungkook blushing?

“Do you like the idea of me thinking of you?”

“Jesus Christ, Taehyung. What is going on with you?”

“I’m curious. I told you.”

“Are you really not playing with me?”

“I’m not, I promise,” Taehyung says.

Jungkook glances at him over his shoulder.

“I’m just… I’m curious, and also curious about why I’m curious about you.”

“This is confusing,” Jungkook says and Taehyung hums in agreement. “If I tell you to stop being curious about me and asking these kinds of questions, will you?”

“Of course,” Taehyung frowns. “I can’t stop what I feel but I won’t be voicing it out.”

“Okay… Then…” Jungkook faces ahead again, probably fidgeting with his ring. “Is it okay if I’m curious about you too?”

Oh.

Taehyung had never assumed it would be reciprocated.

“Yeah, it is,” Taehyung says, wondering if his curiosity is the same as Jungkook’s.

“Don’t play with me like— Like I’m a doll,” Jungkook starts, "but maybe we can learn together? And experiment together?”

“We can,” Taehyung says. It sounds nice. Comfortable.

“Okay.” Jungkook peers at Taehyung. “I forgot what your question was.”

“Did you like hearing that I was thinking about you?” Taehyung says and Jungkook nods but it isn’t enough of a response. Plus Taehyung wants to tease a bit. “Was that a yes or no?”

“I nodded…"

“I know, but I’d like to hear the answer.”

“Yes,” Jungkook says after a beat, the word hushed.

“Why?”

“Because I appreciate you, and it feels good when someone you appreciate thinks about you, it’s reassuring."

“Reassuring?”

“If you randomly think about me, it makes me feel better about my greed. Me being in your mind gives me a slice of bread, if that makes sense.”

“It does.” Oddly enough.

“Why were you thinking of me?” Jungkook wonders.

“I was wondering why I’m curious about you.”

“And?”

“And I don’t know,” Taehyung concludes. “I talked about it with Jimin and he said that I shouldn’t overthink it.”

“He’s right. You shouldn’t.” Jungkook reclines against the sofa as well, his arm bumping against Taehyung’s.

“I guess.”

“But you still have questions.”

“I do…” Taehyung mumbles.

Jungkook chuckles. “Go ahead.”

“Are you always this sensitive to people’s touch?”

“You know you can ease me into those questions,” Jungkook grumbles and he slides down his headband to comb his bang back over his forehead. “And I’m not. I don’t like being touched, actually.”

“ *What?* ” A series of instances where Taehyung has touched Jungkook without asking flash in his mind.

“Before you freak out,” Jungkook begins, “remember that we talked about our boundaries that were and are still very true. You never overstepped those, and I would have told you if you had.”

Taehyung breathes out a relieved sigh.

“I don’t like being touched but I crave to be touched. It’s disorientating, honestly. I suppose it depends on the person.”

“Why are you so sensitive when it’s me?”

“Oh my God.” Jungkook drops his head backward above the couch's seat and he folds his arms over his face, effectively shielding himself from Taehyung's scrutiny. “Aren’t you embarrassed to be talking about this so bluntly?”

“Not at all. Are you?” Taehyung asks, only to be absolutely obnoxious and see how deeper Jungkook’s blush can be.

“Yes,” Jungkook squeaks and Taehyung snorts. “I told you that night. It’s because it’s you.”

That doesn’t clear any of Taehyung’s confusion. “What’s special about me?”

“A lot of things, Taehyung. You’re curious about me, but so am I about you.” Jungkook lowers his arms, loosely folding them over his navel. He folds his legs up and he turns his head on the couch to survey Taehyung, hair fanned out over the seat and silver hoops catching some of the fireplace's flames. “You say you don’t know what you’re doing, yet I’ve never met anyone who understands me and takes care of me as well as you do. You're gentle with me. Your hands are too, I love when they're on me. They're always so careful, so tender. They make me feel safe."

'You do,' is the unsaid admission, yet heard just out loud.

“You say you don’t do affection, yet you’ve been giving me so much of it lately. You have a terrible temper but it’s still a mellow one most of the time. But I like your temper anyway. A lot, actually. It’s you,” Jungkook laughs to himself, bunny teeth peeking out. “You’re smart, kind and giving. I know our wedding is political but…” He pauses, his gaze drifting over Taehyung’s face. “You’ve grown to be a good husband to me."

Jungkook’s eyes are full of an honesty that overwhelms Taehyung and clogs his throat.

All of a sudden, Taehyung wants to bolt out of the room.

“And I feel safe with you. Really safe. It’s… It’s a lot for me. I didn't know how security felt until I arrived here, and I feel it with your family too, but it’s especially true with you. I’m the safest with you, in every way possible: I know you’ll protect me from harm, I know you'll take care of me if need be. You’re special to me, Taehyung, in a way no one ever was,” Jungkook says and he, himself, must feel coy at his own admission because he hides the bottom of his face in the dip of his elbow. “I want to know more about you, and I want you to know more about me, so I really, really, *really* like that you’re curious about me. It makes me feel all— All happy and warm and tingly inside and— And yes.”

So.

Taehyung doesn’t really blush except when he’s angry or embarrassed, so he cannot for the life of him fathom why heat that fills up his cheeks and face and ears.

Jungkook straightens up. “Oh my God.”

“Shut up.” Taehyung scurries on his feet then snatches his cup.

“Oh my God!”

Taehyung strides toward the kitchen where he empties his full cup to start a new one because that's a sensible thing to do.

“You’re blushing!” Jungkook says so loudly that everyone in Vanae must have heard him, which is *humiliating.* He trails after Taehyung and Taehyung knows because he can both hear Jungkook or smell the caramel scent that drowns the one of floral grim.

“I’m not. Fuck off. Stop following me,” Taehyung snips, voice clipped and fame aflame.

“Did you get shy?” Jungkook laughs.

Taehyung freezes amidst pouring water in his cup.

By the Elders.

Taehyung got shy.

“You did!”

“Stop reading my fucking mind!”

Jungkook bursts into a wheezing laughter. “I’ve never seen you shy!”

“I’m not.”

“Liar.”

Taehyung closes the water bottle to smack it on the counter. He slowly turns his head to pin Jungkook with a glare. “I’ll kill you.”

“Maybe we should see if your shyness will kill you first?”

“F—Fuck off,” Taehyung *stammers* and swivels away from the obnoxious Prince.

“You—”

“Say one more word and I will actually kill you.”

Jungkook shuffles to be in front of Taehyung, hands folded behind his back. He tongues at his cheek and it does nothing to hide the pompous smile that brightens his face. “But—”

“Leave.”

“Fiiine,” Jungkook relents, hands in the air. He walks backward toward the living room.

“Can you go farther away. Like—” Taehyung makes a shooing motion. “Far.”

“Nope.”

And Jungkook never goes away, to Taehyung’s displeasure.

Jungkook keeps following Taehyung around like some kind of lost puppy, yapping about *‘I never knew you could be shy’* and *‘Should I compliment you more to see how shy you can get?’* or *‘Who knew chaos dragons could be so adorable’*.

Taehyung hates it.

He hates it when he’s with Jungkook in the living room and has to endure the endless teasing or poking — sometimes literal when Jungkook jabs his index finger over and over again in Taehyung’s arm when Taehyung decides to ignore him.

Taehyung hates it, yet he can’t help but stay.

This is all Jimin’s fault.

Not really.

But it is because Jimin is the one who planted the stupid idea in Taehyung’s mind to stop overthinking.

Taehyung should have overthought this decision. Not only was it expensive, but also unnecessary, and now he has to deal with The Thing.

Taehyung had visited Vanae's market earlier this morning. He had gone with a goal — pretense — in mind to buy some new spices while the jars already full of them to the top had been glaring at him and whining with *'But we're so full already, you don't need to bring more of us!'*

Taehyung had slammed the cupboard's door.

Denial is an uncanny thing, really, because while visiting the market, Taehyung had bought a dozen bags of spices for no damn reason to avoid the inevitable.

Taehyung had eventually stepped inside the shop selling paints and painting related tools.

He had been highly critical of the quality of the powdered pigments, and a little less critical about his own supplies. Taehyung had remembered how Jungkook had mentioned wanting to try making his own paint. So there had been Taehyung: buying the necessary equipment and a manual of instructions on how to make paint from pigments.

Then Taehyung had bought over a dozen of canvas of different sizes, including a huge, way too large one for himself. Because he's an idiotic spender like that. This had unfortunately not been the worst part of Taehyung's hellish trip.

The worst is The Thing he had bought on a whim and had immediately regretted doing so but had been too ashamed to trade it back.

This time it had been the sun's fault.

Something shiny had caught Taehyung's attention in the corner of his eyes. He had not meant to buy it. He had walked past it and wandered through the market even if he had technically been done with his shopping.

It's only after buying two more dozen of useless spices that Taehyung had surrendered his aimless stroll and entered the shop that he had left with a scowl, a heavy hand and an empty pouch of coins.

So Taehyung now has way too many bags of spices and The Thing.

"What the fuck is wrong with me," Taehyung mutters to himself as he paces in his bedroom while pinching the bridge of his nose. He pauses in front of his dresser and braces himself above it. He yanks open the drawer where his underwear are.

There it is.

The Thing.

The Thing that sits below the underwear like some kind of dirty secret.

Although it is a dirty, shameful secret because what was Taehyung even thinking? It's not his style *at all.* It's refined and elegant yet adorned with some gems that are, once again, not Taehyung's style. However The Thing is someone else's style.

A knock erupts on his bedroom door.

Taehyung startles so hard he closes the drawer a tad too strongly, the wood cracking on the edges while the handle breaks from it and stays in his hand.

“What?” Taehyung's voice cracks on that sole word. He clears his throat. “What?” He reiterates more firmly.

“I’m leaving to go to Amaris with Jimin and Yoongi,” Jungkook announces. “I’ll be back later tonight. I should be there for dinner.”

“Alright. Have fun.”

“Will dooo,” Jungkook sing-songs. “Don’t miss me too much!”

Taehyung doesn’t reply or rolls his eyes like he wants to, frozen in place.

He waits until the entrance door clicks shut to leave the handle on the dresser and march down to the basement. There he grabs his canvas — that is seriously too big — along with the cans and bottles of oil paints he had bought for himself.

He hesitates on where to install himself but he opts for the solarium. He’ll have a perfect natural light here, and he can tuck his station in a corner to have a good view of anyone who may enter the place or walk past it outside. He doesn’t want anyone to see what he’ll be painting.

Taehyung settles the array of oil paint he got on a moveable small table that he rolls toward where his stool is. It takes some time to prop the canvas on the easel because of how fucking humongous it is — *what was he thinking…* — but when he’s done, Taehyung sighs and plops down.

He stares at the blank canvas for a while.

For a long, long time.

He ultimately snaps out of his torpor.

He grabs a paintbrush, squeezes some paint on the pallet and dips the bristles in it. He lifts the brush and lets it hover near the canvas for a few minutes before he brushes the white paint that will serve as an undercoat.

The rest comes easier than he had anticipated.

It’s a slow process. It’ll take him days — *weeks* — to finish it because his perfectionist mind won’t allow a single wrong stroke to not be corrected. But he’s making some progress already. The undercoat is done and the basic sketch of the composition is too.

The vision is still clear as day in Taehyung’s mind. He can close his eyes and revisit the memory: see every little detail, shape and glow, and Taehyung only hopes to do justice to the sight that hasn’t left his mind since he first witnessed it.

Jungkook pauses at the doorway of his bedroom.

There are some paper bags and wooden crates neatly placed at the foot of his bed. He's about to ask Taehyung what it is but he chooses not to, preferring to enter the room and close the door behind him.

Too impatient to wait after his bath, Jungkook quickly walks toward the packages and sits in front of them. He removes the cord surrounding the first crate. He lifts the lid and places it next to him.

The inside of the wooden box is filled with 12 large jars of pigments displaying a rainbow of color.

Jungkook doesn't understand at first, and so he grabs one of the jars to bring it to his face and twist the cap open. He sniffs its content but he doesn't really pick up on any particular scent. He dips two of his fingers in the powder, holding a pinch of it between his index and thumb that he rubs. It leaves a green stain on the pads of his fingers.

Jungkook tilts his head.

He deposits the jar back in the crate and grabs the thin book resting at the top of another jar. He flips it open.

'How to make your own paint.'

Jungkook breathes out a muted 'Oh'.

Something both sinks and rises in his chest. He can't tell what it is, but it grows and grows and grows the more he stares at the display in front of him, the more he understands that the square and rectangular flat packages are most likely canvases.

Jungkook lowers the manual inside the crate that he pushes aside to open a second one. More jars fill the box along with a plethora of tools and paintbrushes.

Jungkook shakily exhales through his mouth, blinking fast to chase away the swelling tears. He opens the last crate, smaller than the other two and this one is occupied with pieces of wood and a few packs of screws: a dismantled easel.

Jungkook's brows furrow. His lips tremble as tucks his legs against his chest. He lifts his balled up hands to press them against his stinging eyes and a sob catches in his throat but he forsakes it to open the rest of his gifts.

Those are *gifts.*

Given by Taehyung because there is no doubt in Jungkook's mind that they come from the dragonborn.

Jungkook is soon surrounded by blank canvases and colorful jars of pigment that he has taken out of their boxes. He finds a note at the bottom of one of them that he reads.

'You better pay me back. This cost me a fucking arm and liver. Payments are ~~accepted~~ preferred through house chores.'

Jungkook breaks into tears, like he doesn't remember doing for some time. He doesn't bother being quiet or hiding himself at first but he remembers about dragonborns' enhanced hearing and so he muffles his noises in the crook of his elbow, cries rattling his body.

He peers around his bedroom that feels like one for the very first time, unlike the one at the citadel.

It looks alive here, as though a person is actually inhabiting the place.

It's neat but there's still a sweater that is haphazardly folded on the chair facing his vanity dresser, or a new pair of shoes Jungkook has yet to unpack. There is also the metal sculpture of a snake on his desk that had been made by Jimin; a painting that Dahee had given him that she had said had been passed down their family for generations; and also a pile of books given by Junhyun to Jungkook.

Then there's the wooden, spherical stand propped on his nightstand, holding at its crux a storm globe, one that Taehyung had made a night after Jungkook had timidly requested it.

A pull in Jungkook's chest coalesces with the itch fluttering its wings there.

He rises to his feet, unsteady and wobbly and he staggers when he nearly trips on one of the crate's lids. He walks out of his bedroom, the note clutched in his hand and the tears endless and warm on his cheeks. He holds onto the wall when he climbs down the stairs and halts at the bottom.

Taehyung is in the kitchen, back to the rest of the room as he cooks their dinner.

"It's not ready yet," Taehyung says.

Jungkook ignores the remark to cross the distance between himself and Taehyung because there is too much of it right now. He pauses behind him. He extends a hand then retracts it. He hesitates some more but he eventually manages to hold onto the hem of Taehyung's shirt. He doesn't let go, even when Taehyung turns around.

"I just started—" Taehyung's eyes widen. He snuffs out the stove's fire then fully faces Jungkook. "What hap—"

"Bread?"

"You— Yeah, of course."

Jungkook wraps his arms around Taehyung's neck and he allows himself to cry in front of someone without restraint.

It's okay because it's Taehyung.

Jungkook nuzzles Taehyung's neck, pressing himself flush against him and relying on him without a second thought when he grows a little dizzy from how overwhelming his happiness is. Arms slowly curl around Jungkook, tucking him into a hug.

"What's wrong?" Taehyung asks and Jungkook shakes his head, crying a little harder at the question because Taehyung sounds worried of all things. "I'm sorry if I overstepped with the paint and everything. I just thought—"

“I’m happy,” Jungkook whispers, relishing into the hands that tightly yet gently cup his sides and waist.

“Oh. Alright... That’s alright, yeah?”

Jungkook nods against Taehyung’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he says when he doesn’t get interrupted by another sob.

“You’re welcome.” One of Taehyung's hands moves to cradle Jungkook’s nape. “I was kidding in the note.”

Jungkook emits a wet chuckle.

He doesn’t know for how long he’s embraced by Taehyung who has grown to be so tender with Jungkook, always handling him with so much care that it never fails to clog up Jungkook’s throat and make him crave for more.

Jungkook eventually lets go, however, just enough to wipe his eyes while still keeping an arm around Taehyung’s neck. “Sorry. M’really happy.”

“Got nothing to apologize for,” Taehyung says and cleans Jungkook’s nose with a tissue which should be disgusting but Jungkook is too content and Taehyung clearly does not care. “You’re alright?”

“Mhm, yes."

“Do you want to help me cook?”

“Please,” Jungkook says, not willing to be away from Taehyung, but he reluctantly has to when Taehyung shuffles him to the side.

Taehyung takes Jungkook’s hand in his own and pulls him toward the kitchen island where vegetables and more ingredients are neatly ordered. He lets go of Jungkook and he slides a pestle and mortar toward Jungkook then says “Can you grind those for me?”

Jungkook hums his agreement as he passes the collar of his shirt over his eyes again. He asks himself if complying to Taehyung's request makes him happier than he already is, and when the answer is a blaring ‘yes’, he promptly gets to work.

“It’ll be good practice for when you’ll have to grind the pigments,” Taehyung says.

Jungkook bursts into tears again at the reminder of the lovely gifts waiting for him in his bedroom as he begins to grind the spices through blurry eyes.

“Shit. Sorry. I was—”

“I’m really happy, okay? Really happy,” Jungkook says through a sharp inhalation. “Thank you.”

“I— Uhh… Okay. You’re welcome. It’s okay if your tears fall in the bowl. It’ll add some salt and flavor but try not to snot in it though,” Taehyung teases and distractedly hands a tissue to Jungkook.

Jungkook laughs then blows his nose in the tissue then weakly smacks Taehyung's shoulder. “Shut up." When Jungkook peers at him, there’s a smile floating on Taehyung’s lips. The sound of the

kitchen knife hitting the cutting board is muffled by the rumble of bliss in Jungkook's head.

Jungkook grabs the sleeve of Taehyung's top and lightly tugs on it.

Taehyung peers at him. "Hm?"

"Bread? Please?"

Jungkook can't restrain the pleased sound he makes when Taehyung immediately turns and allows Jungkook to snuggle up to him. Jungkook grips onto the back of Taehyung's shirt. His lips brush against Taehyung's throat and he closes his eyes when a hand finds its way at the base of his scalp, the thumb kneading the back of his ear.

There's something delicate in the air, a bubble once fragile and tentative, that has now become more assured and free.

Chapter End Notes

Next update will be sooner XDDDD I took a tiny break of a week after chapter 20 to take a breather, but me is: back 🤩🤍 I loved writing this chapter!! It's a slow one but slow chapters are needed especially when I can have taekook's relationship's progress hehe, it was even more fun to write Taehyung's struggles throughout it 😭

We've unraveled more of Jungkook's past but there are still a couple things to be explained and shown 👀🤍

I hope you enjoyed this chapter and please don't hesitate to leave me some comments and feed me some bread, I'll feed y'all more bread too when I'll update 🥺🤍 I'm still catching up to comments please wait for meee, I'll switch to reply by most recent ones so I'll see y'all there right away from now on T____T Thank you very very much for reading hehe 🤍

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH21.

Jungkook's outfit
Taehyung's outfit
The black shirt
The hair band
Jungkook's botany book

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Taekook at the library made by artsi_sss!! This is made in collaboration with my dear and beloved Sisi who dedicated the month of June to SLB, this is the 1st part of the collab, the link to the 2nd part is at the end of CH22 🤲🤍 (and it's spicy 👁️👄👁️🔞)
❧ Arts of Taekook dual wallpapers made by artsi_sss

❧ SLB video trailer (dailymotion) made by Predawn_Light
❧ SLB video trailer (youtube) made by Predawn_Light

❧ Art of Taekook hugging in the kitchen made by hazeldaisies

❧ Art of Jungkook's portrait made by sunkjjk
❧ Art of Taehyung's portrait made by sunkjjk

Chapter 22: Scented Blueberries and Campfires

Chapter Summary

Taehyung and Jungkook go on a hunting trip turned into a teaching class where Jungkook has the chance to see Taehyung at work — for the most part. What Jungkook does not expect is the epiphany that will ensue after a night in the tent.

Chapter Notes

!!Please read !! The content warning spoil some parts of this chapter so if you don't have many things that trigger you like me, feel free to skip them (they're at the end of this note)!! If not please make sure to go through them 🤍

Disclaimer: this chapter is the most self-indulgent pile of fluff I've ever written 👍🤍 It's also 🔞 spicy 🔞 in one part ✨

So, you may be asking yourself *"Why would she post such a long chapter instead of cutting it in half? Is she okay?"* The brief answer to both is: insanity 🥸 🤍 So I won't babble any further, enjoy the chapter and I'll see you at the endnotes 🤍

Song recommendations (kinda, it's just what I listened to for each part):

From the beginning to "Of course! Lead the way."
1) Playlist 1
2) Playlist 2

From "Taehyung looks exhausted, which…" to "Did you enjoy the hunt?"
3) Playlist 3

From "Ah. Jungkook had already forgotten…" till end of this scene
4) Doja Cat — Streets

From "…supposed to do?" to "...as he falls asleep."
5) Playlist 4

From "Jungkook eats then he spends…" til end of the scene
6) Playlist 7

From there any of the soft playlist from above or this one Playlist 8

Then from "Once or twice every hour…" til the end of the chap
7) Youtube playlist, Spotify playlist (start from the song 'Lord's Apparition')

Cw:

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1) nsfw 🔞
2) kidnapping (I see some people worrying about it, so those who don't want spoilers and want to keep the suspense: look away. As for the others who don't mind a tiny spoil: everything will be fine, don't worry hehe, you can read peacefully and enjoy the fluff and this chapter 🤰 The one that was kidnapped will be fine, I promise 👀🤍)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung has been religiously painting for hours on end since he has bought the painting supplies several days ago, and Jungkook has never been more curious.

Taehyung is keeping an unwavering secrecy about the subject of his project, to a point where he has banned Jungkook from entering his ‘corner of creation’ until further notice. Jungkook has complied, of course, however it does not hinder his questions.

Is Taehyung painting an animal? A creature or dragon? Or perhaps something more scenic? Jungkook has a feeling Taehyung would love to paint sylvan or high spots on hills, maybe even the cave where they had their date with the summersweet butterflies.

Jungkook had also asked last night if Taehyung would eventually show him the final piece, and what had surprised Jungkook had been Taehyung’s hesitation, the *‘I don’t know yet’* he had answered with.

It had only served to worsen Jungkook’s curiosity, and if Taehyung’s small but present smile had been any indication, the dragonborn is wholly aware of this.

Nevertheless, Jungkook has been painting as well, although making the paint would be more accurate. The process is slow yet soothing, especially because Taehyung had built within a couple hours a sturdy workstation for Jungkook that he had placed inside the solarium against one of the bay windows, the furniture complemented by a plethora of storing compartments.

So now Jungkook has not only a brand new table *gifted* by his husband — a thought that never fails to put a smile on Jungkook’s face and prompt a swirl of warmth in his chest —, but he also gets to spend his free time with Taehyung in the cozy solarium.

They still haven’t been given any date for their departure to Kaiya, however after checking in with Elder Miseon through Dahee, they have learned that it should happen soon, but not soon enough to force Taehyung to cancel his plans for the week: go on a hunting trip, an expedition that Jungkook will not only join, but has also been invited by Taehyung himself.

Jungkook is buzzing with excitement as he gets ready in the bathroom, Taehyung waiting for him downstairs.

Jungkook loves paying attention to what he wears and the physicality that ensues from it, strongly valuing his appearance and body in regard to others to determine how to behave with this or that person — but also simply because he revels in wearing pretty garments and jewelry.

This morning is no different, except for the fact that Jungkook takes more time than usual preparing himself due to The Afternoon he and Taehyung had at Amaris' library where Taehyung had called him beautiful.

Several times.

Jungkook's face heats up when the flattery rings in his ears, hoping for it to be given once more today.

It still remains surreal to Jungkook that a man like Taehyung considers him beautiful and finds it in himself to voice it out in spite of how emotionally stunted the dragonborn can be. However Taehyung has been doing so much better in that regard, Jungkook muses while carding the wooden comb through his hair.

Taehyung has evidently grown more comfortable in speaking out loud words of approval, teasing and even encouragement to Jungkook, and this ease in their relationship translates in so many physical ways too. Taehyung allows more and more proximity between them, to a point where he appears to seek it *himself*, like when he had played with Jungkook's shoulder jewelry and touched his back. And Jungkook, starved for human contacts, gorges onto all that Taehyung gives him.

Jungkook has also been feeling exceedingly odd around Taehyung lately.

There's always this tickling sensation that runs down Jungkook's body whenever Taehyung grazes Jungkook's skin or touches him in a bolder manner with a warm palm secured on his lower back. Then, there's the itch in Jungkook's chest that flickers to life whenever Taehyung shares something with Jungkook, looks at him or, in a more simple aspect, exists near Jungkook.

Jungkook has grown closer to Taehyung in a plethora of ways, and he tries to not question the resulting yearning whose needle and thread slowly sew at a place near Jungkook's heart, the stitches seeming less and less separable.

"How's Minsoo?" Jungkook asks once out of the bathroom minutes later. "You went to see him earlier, no?"

Taehyung's shoulders tense. "He's fine."

Jungkook surveys Taehyung who sports an unreadable expression, the indifference in it reminding Jungkook of when he had first arrived in Vanae. "Your mother has been complaining about how he's been refusing to see her. Or anyone else, for that matter, aside from you."

"It's how he usually is," Taehyung dismisses with a shrug. "You're ready?"

"Yes." Jungkook files Taehyung's reaction at the back of his mind, not addressing the change of subject.

“You should put on your coat,” Taehyung suggests and Jungkook’s lips purse in response. “I won’t be with you all the time since I’ll have to leave every now and then to prepare everything for the hunt.”

“Can’t you make some kind of summer globe for me? Like a storm globe with fire?”

Taehyung slings the heavy net of ropes around his shoulder as he levels Jungkook with a playfully exasperated stare. “I can, but it won’t last long enough to keep you warm without proper winter attire,” he says then grabs the offending coat. “Plus you’ll be flying with me, and a fire globe wouldn’t help against today's cold wind."

Jungkook knows this.

But still.

Jungkook would rather have Taehyung’s hands to keep him warm rather than a piece of fabric.

Taehyung slings the garment around Jungkook’s shoulders, pulling on the lapels to engulf Jungkook in the coat. He fiddles with the collar then adjusts it around the neck and his fingers sporadically brush against the throat as he does so, eliciting fleeting waves of goosebumps on Jungkook’s nape. It's only after fastening the buttons that Taehyung deems the job done. “Just keep it on, yeah?”

“Okay,” Jungkook says and lifts the collar of the coat to conceal his smile, happy that Taehyung took the initiative to put on the coat for him. “I will,” he adds with a purpose that meets its due.

“Good,” Taehyung says and he sounds…

He sounds *pleased*, and Jungkook preens.

Taehyung nods toward the entrance. “Come on.”

Taehyung is dressed as he commonly is, with a black long sleeved shirt, black work pants, and, of course, equally black combat boots. Taehyung has his own winter cloak thrown over himself, the criss-crossing buckles at the front nicely hugging his chest, and Jungkook is, for the umpteenth time, struck by how handsome his husband is.

“You’re really pretty,” Jungkook says.

“So are you,” Taehyung answers without missing a beat as he pulls the door open.

Jungkook’s cheeks and ears fill up with warmth. “I— Huh. Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Thanks.”

Taehyung snorts. “Thanks?”

“Shut up, you prick. You’re—” Jungkook averts his eyes when Taehyung’s mirthful gaze settles on him. Jungkook rubs his palms up and down his face. “I don’t like you."

Taehyung hums and crosses the distance again. He leans closer to Jungkook then he lowers his head before tilting it to the side to find Jungkook’s evading eyes, a smile curving his lips. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” Jungkook says with a non-existent resolution.

“Then why are you blushing at a little compliment from me? Hm?”

Jungkook’s mouth parts then closes a couple times before it clicks shut around a noncommittal sound of embarrassment that ends in a squeak. He doesn’t get the time to either pull himself together or think of a good retort as Taehyung straightens up and walks out of the house.

“Prick…” Jungkook mutters to himself and begrudgingly joins Taehyung outside, closing the door behind him.

“Let’s hurry, they’re waiting,” Taehyung says with barely contained eagerness.

“You look excited,” Jungkook fondly notes.

“It’ll be so much fun. Some members of my hunting squadrons will be here to help me supervise the hunt, but most of the group for this expedition are kids and inexperienced adults. It’s more of a test rather than a full blown hunt. I give hunting classes every now and then and it’s been a while since the last lesson.”

“They’ll be hunting actual prey?”

“Yup. A flock of griffins,” Taehyung says with an upbeat nod and a smile that dissipates but is still present in his eyes as he peers at Jungkook. “You’ve got everything you need?”

“I do,” Jungkook answers, stupidly happy that Taehyung bothers asking, however Jungkook's needs or wants used to never be taken into consideration. Now that they finally are, now that they’re even taken care of, Jungkook can’t help but press a *‘Thank you’* against Taehyung's cheek in a light kiss.

Taehyung huffs and turns his head away from Jungkook.

“Should we keep the pretense there?”

“Yeah, like usual.”

“Alright. I’m ready then,” Jungkook says with an excitement that Taehyung echoes with a small smile before turning to his dragon self.

It doesn’t take long for them to see a thunder of dragons in the sky, a smaller group on ground with what Jungkook supposes to be hatchlings climbing onto the back of the adult dragons.

Taehyung makes a noise from where he’s hovering in the sky, commanding the attention of the thunder that replies with growls, chirps and other sounds of their own. One of them is familiar, one that Jungkook has heard quite often, and a wide smile stretches his lips.

“Jimin!” Jungkook waves at the lithe dragon that races toward him and pauses once facing Taehyung’s open talon. Jimin nudges Jungkook with his snout, huffing a puff of air that Jungkook grumbles at when it messes up his hair.

A second dragon approaches them but remains at a safe distance below them.

Woobin.

Taehyung had warned Jungkook about the man's presence at the hunting trip, an agreement Taehyung had made with Jimin after the two had discussed Woobin moving in to Jimin's house.

Jungkook surveys Woobin, memories of burnt ropes and a falling carriage popping in his mind. Taehyung’s thoughts must have followed a similar path because a low rumble elevates in the air that Jungkook easily reads as one of warning, and Woobin does as well because he drifts away from Taehyung, Jimin trailing after him.

The thunder is large, with perhaps 40 members, their wings batting through the air as they make their way in the sky toward their destination.

They eventually reach a peaceful and comfortable looking patch of grass where the thunder lands on, the dragons shifting mid air to drop down in their human form. The adults help the hatchlings descend, some jumping off on their own while a few tumble on the grass with happy chirps when one of the adult dragons turns upside down and playfully shakes them off.

Taehyung lowers to let Jungkook climb down. He falls in his human form seconds later.

Jungkook opens his mouth to speak, however before a single word can leave it, a hive of children swarms Taehyung, some shouldering past Jungkook to hug Taehyung and cling onto him.

Jungkook steps away as more children run up to Taehyung.

He surveys Taehyung who bursts into laughter when a kid trips then snorts angry flames before she springs back to her feet. Taehyung’s grin is bright and takes over his entire face, the kind that Jungkook has never gotten the chance to see before: toothy and wide, with his nose scrunched and eyes wrinkled at the corners.

Taehyung picks one of the kids up. "You've grown so much since the last time I saw," he tells one of them. "By the Elders, you'll be as tall as time in no time," he exclaims to another. Tiny hands tug on Taehyung’s cloak to demand his attention while others grip onto the back of it as a boy climbs up Taehyung to hug him from behind.

Jungkook can’t refrain himself from thinking about how—

“Ah… Taehyung would make such a good father.”

Jungkook startles. His head swivels to the right.

“You thought that, huh?” Jimin teases.

“No…”

Jimin snickers. “Taehyung loves kids and they love him just as much, if the way he’s currently drowning in them isn’t enough of a hint,” he says as he and Jungkook watch how Taehyung walks around with the group of kids following him like ducklings would do with their mother. “You must also know that Taehyung is an absolute weakling when it comes to children. He *will* cave in to whatever they demand. So if you and him intend to adopt one day—”

“Shut up,” Jungkook says, mortified but also curious.

“—you’ll have to be a strict parent because Taehyung won’t be.”

Jungkook glares at Jimin. “Can you stop?”

“Only if you tell me where my baby is.”

“We left Revna with Dahee and Junhyun,” Jungkook quietly says to Jimin. “We thought it’d be safer, and I don’t want her to spend all her days in the ruby while she’s here.”

Jimin’s shoulders slump. “There goes my fun trip.”

“Taehyung! It’s been too long!” A man says.

“Yeah. We’ve been waiting, *leader* ,” someone else says, whose sass is received with a twist of the ear from Taehyung.

“I told you I was busy,” Taehyung says.

“Introduce us to your husband!” A woman interjects.

All at once, around 40 pairs of eyes converge onto Jungkook.

Taehyung approaches him, the same boy that had been clinging onto his back now sitting on his shoulders.

Jungkook internally sighs in relief when Taehyung extends a hand toward him, a bundle of nerves constricting in him. He doesn’t want to make a bad impression on the dragonborns, especially those from Taehyung’s hunting squad that Jungkook hopes to get along with.

“This is Jungkook,” Taehyung starts as he takes Jungkook’s hand. “He—”

People never let Taehyung finish his sentence because they begin to fire questions after greetings after more questions.

Hands reach out for Jungkook that he shakes with a smile, doing his best to catalog everyone’s name and faces. Some of the dragonborns pat Jungkook’s arm or back while others pull him into an accolade or hug that Jungkook happily reciprocates.

He answers some of the inquiries and his agitation ebbs away the more he’s warmly integrated in the group dynamic, laughing at an anecdote someone recounts about one of Taehyung’s past adventures.

“Let him breathe for one second,” Taehyung scolds with a click of his tongue as he pulls Jungkook to his side by the elbow.

“You can’t blame them for being excited that you, of all people, got married,” a man named Kang says. “Never in a million years would I have seen that one coming. You never even dated anyone!”

“Now why is my dating life public knowledge?” Taehyung grumbles and Jungkook chuckles with Jimin when the latter settles next to him.

“Taehyung! You lucky bastard,” Youngjae guffaws and punches Taehyung’s arm.

“He’s the lucky one,” Taehyung scoffs.

Jungkook arches a brow. “Am I? Who keeps forgetting to prepare coffee in the morning every single day?”

“Who never tosses the empty toilet rolls every single day?” Taehyung fires back and helps the boy climb down his shoulders.

“Who never—”

“I’m pretty sure Taehyung doesn’t make the coffee because he loves yours,” Jimin says, an arm looped around Jungkook’s.

“Really?” Jungkook asks, ignoring Taehyung’s *‘I never said that’*. “How will you survive without my coffee for the next three days?” He carries on with a faux moue and he lifts a hand to cup Taehyung’s face, half to tease the dragonborn, half to bask in the allowed skin on skin contact. “Oh, Darling… Will you be alright? Would you like to sit down for a second?”

Taehyung lightly smacks Jungkook’s hand away. "You're obnoxious."

“Of course. It must be why you asked me to join you today. Insisted, dare I say,” Jungkook snickers and remembrances of a tentative — *coy* — Taehyung mumbling through his proposal floats in Jungkook’s head.

“I did *not* insist.”

“Yes you did.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll bite you.”

“Do it,” Jungkook challenges with a jut of his chin.

The thing is, Taehyung takes the challenge, as he often does.

He grabs a hold of Jungkook’s jaw and leans forward to nip at him, his teeth gently biting once on Jungkook’s cheek.

Jungkook freezes for several reasons: 1) Taehyung *actually* bit him, 2) Taehyung’s face is close enough for Jungkook to feel his breath, 3) Taehyung rasps a *‘Brat ’* against Jungkook’s skin that is definitely too quiet to be heard by anyone, meaning that it is fully destined for Jungkook only and not prompted by the pretense — unlike the bite —, *meaning* that Jungkook melts a little at how fond he foolishly believes the word to be.

“Alright, lovebirds. Let’s keep it child friendly,” Jimin pipes up.

Taehyung lets go of Jungkook to roll his eyes at Jimin. “Let’s gather around. We’ve gotta plan for tomorrow.”

Someone tugs at the sleeve of Jungkook's coat. He looks down at the little girl that grins up at him. "You'll hunt with us, Sir?"

"Well I'm human so I can't transform into a dragon, but I'll be watching on the sidelines," Jungkook smiles and crouches in front of the girl. "You can call me Jungkook. What's your name?"

"Naya! My dad gave it to me," she giggles.

"Ehh, that's such a pretty name." Jungkook plucks a flower that he discreetly tucks behind Naya's ear. "Even prettier than that flower."

"What flower?" Naya frowns.

"The one behind your right ear."

Naya lifts her hand to it and gasps when she feels the flower's petals. "Wow."

"Aaah," Jimin loudly sighs, arms crossed over his chest and looking at Taehyung who's staring at Jungkook. "Jungkook would make such a great father."

"Quiet," Taehyung snips and walks away.

Jungkook straightens up and he holds Naya's hand when she lifts it toward him, the two of them following Taehyung at the center of the small field where they all gather.

The group makes itself comfortable with most of the adults sitting at the back while the kids are at the front, all facing Taehyung who plops down in front of them.

Jungkook is installed at the side of the group but at the front row, Jimin and Woobin cascading on his left. Taehyung hasn't acknowledged Woobin's presence once, seemingly preferring to behave like the man does not exist.

Several kids chat at once when a lull stretches in the group, all speaking over each other until Taehyung lifts an index to his mouth, swiftly shushing the cacophony.

"One at a time," Taehyung says. "Raise your hand."

A boy does and speaks when Taehyung nods at him. "What are we hunting?"

"Griffins."

The kids erupt into enthusiastic exclamations. The adults, on the other hand, grimace, and Jungkook chuckles at the concern that washes over their faces.

"Uhh, isn't that too much for our first hunt?" A man worries.

"It's a flock of three griffins only. The members of my squadron and I will oversee everything. We've already scouted the area, and their nest isn't too far from where we are, however still far enough for us to be safe here," Taehyung explains, his voice calm with an assurance that eases the group's apprehension. "Our first step will be…"

"Tracking!" The kids finish.

“Exactly. It’ll be a job that *you* will handle."

The kids must be ranging from 9 to 15 years old. It’s younger than what Jungkook would expect in a hunting class, however he supposes that it is where another difference in culture lies between humans and dragonborns, where dragonborns don’t necessarily shield their children from the source of their food and themes like death.

“We’ll be setting camp here tonight. Tomorrow morning, we’ll go over your knowledge regarding griffins, then we’ll revise what you’ve learned about tracking and securing the hunt. We’ll also touch on how to communicate in our dragon form during a hunt and make sure that everyone is on the same page,” Taehyung says as he surveys the group, children and adults both nodding.

Jungkook does too even if he won't be participating.

“Once the griffins are located, you guys will stay back and remain with Yeji and Mira. I don’t want to see a single one of you try anything fancy once the actual hunting starts. Understood?”

The children obediently nod.

“Does that work with everyone?” Taehyung inquires.

“Depends at what time we’ll have to get up,” a burly man grumbles who must be in his late thirties, a certain Insung who hasn’t been the most welcoming toward Jungkook.

“What time would you like to wake up for tomorrow?” Taehyung asks and the group debates for a moment until they settle on a decision. “9am it is. Everyone agrees?” A chorus of *‘Yes’* answers Taehyung. “The lots of you will be tracking the griffins on foot through the forest at the beginning.”

“Why not dragon right away?” A boy pouts.

“I can track better in my dragon form,” a girl adds.

“And you stink more too.”

“No I don’t!”

“Yes you do!”

Taehyung zaps the two kids who erupt into a series of giggles. “You need to hone your hunting skills both in your human and dragon form. Some animals and creatures live in caves and underground tunnels that you won’t be able to access as a dragon.”

“What does hone mean?” The boy on Jungkook’s right mumbles against his knees, his legs drawn up and arms wrapped around them.

“It means working on making perfect or really good,” Jungkook explains.

The boy looks at him for a fleeting second before ducking his head. “Thanks.”

Jungkook smiles at the shy boy. “You’re welcome.”

“We’ll be split in four teams total, each one led by two members of my hunting squadron,” Taehyung carries on. “We can figure out now who will be with who.”

“Don’t put me in this prick’s team,” a woman with long, white hair and tanned skin snips while she jerks her thumb in the direction of a second woman. “I ain’t leading the same team as her.”

The second woman scoffs, freckles dotting her face and a long diagonal scar marring her face from the temple to the chin. “Fuck you,” she says, and some kids theatrically gasp and point at her. “Don’t want to be in yours either.”

The two women argue some more, those around trying to calm things down to no avail.

Jungkook watches Taehyung who silently observes the scene, the latter’s head propped in his hand, elbow on his knee. Jungkook wonders why Taehyung isn’t intervening.

Jimin sighs and shakes his head. “Those two…”

“What’s going with them?” Jungkook whispers.

“Three words: love, denial, misunderstandings,” Jimin says, three fingers raised. “They’re part of Taehyung’s squadron and depending on their mood, they should either be in the same team or in separate ones. He’s figuring out which side they fall into today,” he says with a nod toward Taehyung. “No one can ever tell but Taehyung always manages to get it right somehow. A wild guess would be that emotionally constipated people have developed their own language.”

Jungkook chuckles in his palm. Jimin winks at him.

“First team will be mine but led by Mira and Yeji since I’ll remain at the back,” Taehyung ultimately decides.

To Jungkook’s surprise, the two formerly protesting women both curtly nod at Taehyung.

From that point onward, Taehyung, the kids, the adults and the seasoned hunters all determine the rest of the teams’ constitution.

The conversation is a little chaotic at first and more of a debate, however Taehyung easily navigates through it but not only just that. Taehyung clearly keeps in mind any kind of feud, friendship or preferences for each member, guiding the discussion and helping split the group into compatible units. By the end of it, everyone — for the most part — is smiling or excitedly chatting together and anticipating the next day.

Some kids whine when they don’t end up in Taehyung’s team, and before Taehyung can cave in as he’s evidently about to do, the hunters of his squadron intervene and chastise the kids for trying to take advantage of Taehyung’s weaknesses.

“I’m not weak for them,” Taehyung retorts.

“Sure thing, leader,” Mira snorts.

“Explain why you've already complied with over a dozen of their requests including right now? You’re braiding Naya’s hair after she pouted at you for one second,” Yeji says.

Taehyung’s motions pause. He lowers his head and says nothing, but he does carry on with the braid when Naya peers up at him from where she’s sitting on his crossed legs.

The close knitted bond that binds dragonborns is always so palpable, and it is especially true for this group. Amaris’ people also maintain close relationships, but it’s different here, where Vanae's people appear to be part of one, grand family.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung who’s showing a map to one of the more quiet kids.

Jungkook has noticed how a few children that have been quite closed off were put in the same team as the most out-going ones. He suspects that it’s a decision Taehyung has consciously made, to perhaps help the quiet kids come out of their shell, and it’s confirmed minutes later when the shy kids smile and talk, even if still timidly.

Taehyung is quick and efficient with the remainder of the hunt’s organization that is dealt with a brief while later.

Jungkook can see the way the group looks up to Taehyung. Their respect shines in their eyes and raising hands to ask something, or in their playfulness and attentiveness.

Taehyung has this slight tiredness draping his form that oddly makes him even more beautiful. His hair is ruffled and pushed back, a few unruly strands dangling over his forehead on one side. A smile dances on his lips as he answers more queries while the rest of the group prepares the tents.

Jungkook struggles at first to put a word on how he feels as he watches Taehyung be in his element as Vanae's leader, but he soon finds one that comes close to the truth: he’s *charmed,* like he has never been before, yearning to reach for Taehyung and ensure that he’s real.

A few campfires have been made to light the area as evening arrives.

Jungkook is exchanging with Mira and Yeji when he catches how the quiet boy from earlier plops down under a tree on his own. “I’ll be right back,” he says and makes his escape. He walks toward the kid and sits down next to him.

“Hi."

The boy deftly avoids Jungkook’s gaze.

“Is everything okay?”

The boy nods.

“I’m Jungkook, what’s your name?”

“Areum.”

“You don’t like being around this many people?”

Areum sighs, hiding his face in his drawn up knees. “S’too much.”

Jungkook had a feeling this was at the core of the boy’s aloofness.

“Areumie,” Taehyung says as he arrives and crouches in front of him. “Where were you hiding, huh? We’ve been looking for you.”

“I don’t want to be here,” Areum mumbles.

“You say that now but I know you’ll be excited to track those griffins tomorrow. Plus the other kids need you, you know. Don’t tell them I said this to you,” Taehyung begins and lowers his voice, “but you’re the best tracker in the class and by a looong shot.”

Areum snorts a laugh and rubs his index under his nose. “I know.”

“It’ll be fun, I promise, and you’ll be in my team,” Taehyung smiles and ruffles Areum’s hair before glancing at Jungkook. “I see you’ve met Jungkook? Has he been nice to you or should I ground him?”

“That’s rich coming from you,” Jungkook replies. “I should have grounded you the first day we met.”

“It’s okay. Taehyung never grounds us, so he won’t ground you too,” Areum says.

“Tormenting him must be fun then,” Jungkook jests and Areum snickers.

“While you two plan my demise,” Taehyung begins with a pointed look at Areum, “I was about to go check out where the hot springs are. Want to join me?”

“I’d love to,” Jungkook says and stands, Areum mirroring him.

“Let’s go now. The moon is bright tonight, so we won’t need any torches.” Taehyung presents his hand to Areum who takes it.

The three of them make their way inside the forest, the camp soon disappearing from their view behind them.

They find the first hot spring fairly easily, this one shallow and for the kids.

They continue their walk around for a little longer, and Jungkook catches the concerned glances Taehyung discreetly throws at Areum before they dissipate the longer the three of them stroll through the forest.

Areum has visibly relaxed by now, the night’s quietude having had its desired effect as he sways his and Taehyung’s clasped hands while humming a song.

“Feeling better, Areum?” Jungkook wonders.

“Yes."

“You know you can tell me when it becomes too much, Areumie,” Taehyung says and sits on a large rock, Areum climbing up next to him while Jungkook crouches on the ground to examine a strange yellow flower he has never seen before.

“You were busy.”

“Even if I am busy, you can tell me, alright?” Taehyung says.

“But you look tired.”

“We had a long flight.”

“But what if you’re really busy?” Areum continues. “You were really busy.”

Taehyung hums for a moment. “You can tell Jungkook, then."

Jungkook’s head darts toward Taehyung.

“He’s nice.”

“But you hate humans,” Areum frowns.

An embarrassed moue paints Taehyung’s face. He glances at Jungkook then at Areum. “People change,” he says after clearing his throat. “I have. I was very judgmental because I was scared.”

Areum gasps. “ *You* were scared? But you’re never scared!”

“Everyone can be scared,” Taehyung chuckles. “I was terrified of humans. And of Jungkook.”

Jungkook stills on his spot at the confession that takes him aback, yet rings a click of understanding in his mind.

All of a sudden, Taehyung’s initial aloofness and scorn makes *so much sense,* and their disappearance does too. “You weren't scared of me anymore after the manor,” Jungkook realizes, and when Taehyung nods, Jungkook’s lips press together before they curl upward. “I’m glad.”

“That means he’s nice if you’re not scared of him anymore?” Areum wonders.

“He is."

Areum surveys Jungkook with a wary look. “You trust Jungkook?” He asks Taehyung.

Jungkook doesn’t know if he wants to hear the answer to this question, but he’s not given a choice as Taehyung replies before Jungkook can formulate an excuse to escape the conversation.

“I do," Taehyung declares. "I’d trust him with you, and you’re my favorite student by *far,* so that says a lot, right?”

“It does,” Areum giggles as Taehyung ruffles his hair. “Okay. I trust him too. That means I can show my breaths?”

“Show me your breaths?” Jungkook shuffles to sit on the grass in front of the other two. “How many do you have?”

“I have five,” Areum quietly says, head ducked low. “I’m not a chaos dragon like Taehyung but I have lots of breath, and it scares people sometimes.”

Jungkook huffs. “I think having five breaths is super cool.”

Areum lifts his head enough to meet Jungkook's gaze. "You really think so?"

"Yes! Are you kidding? I wish I had this many breaths, or even one but I'm just a boring human and not a special dragonborn like you," Jungkook laments with a dramatic sigh that prompts a snickers out of Areum.

"My nanny says that I need lots of training with Taehyung because one of my breathes is fire and sometimes when I sneeze I burn my clothes and my nanny gets angry but the other nannies laugh even if they're scolded by my nanny so it's okay," Areum rambles, his cheeks cutely bunching up. "But I'm training. 'Cause I want to be strong."

"If you continue to train like you are, you'll become even more powerful than Taehyung," Jungkook assures.

"No chance in hell," Taehyung playfully scoffs.

Areum scowl. "I can be stronger than you."

"Nope."

"I will."

"Never."

"Yes!"

"Nu-huh."

Jungkook watches Taehyung and Areum argue. He can tell that Taehyung pokes fun at the boy to help him unwind even more and it works, Areum dissolving into a series of snorts and giggles when Taehyung mercilessly tickles the boy's sides.

"What about your class?" Taehyung asks minutes later. "Are you the strongest in it?"

"Mhm," Areum nods, swinging his legs back and forth on the boulder he's occupying with Taehyung. "But I have to hold back 'cause they're scared of me. I never hurt anyone though."

"People tend to be scared of what is out of the ordinary, or of what they don't understand," Jungkook chips in.

"My nanny says this too, but I don't have friends. I want friends..."

"Do you know who Aecha is?" Taehyung says and when Areum confirms that she's in his class, Taehyung carries on. "You should talk to her. She's really nice. I think she doesn't have many friends either."

"Oh that's not good," Areum frowns to himself. "You think—" He pauses and fiddles with the strings of his winter vest. "You think she'll want to talk to me?"

"I'm sure she'd love that. You should—"

"Ah, there they are," Youngjae says as he makes his way toward the small group. "Areum, come with me, the rest of the kids are picking their tents."

“Okay.” Areum jumps down the boulder to join Youngjae in a quick jog.

“Heard that sound, Areumie?” Taehyung shouts and leans back on his hands.

Areum turns around. “What sound?”

“The one of my heart breaking into pieces because you didn’t give me my goodbye kiss.”

Areum bursts into laughter. He races toward Taehyung to jump into his arms and peck Taehyung’s cheek with a grin.

Jungkook internally coos.

“Maybe you can see if you can room with Aecha?” Taehyung says. “So you can talk to her?”

“It’s scary,” Areum mumbles, held up by Taehyung.

“I know it can be, but you’re brave, aren’t you?” Taehyung says and Areum vehemently nods. “So you can be brave for her. You should show her your blue flames, she’ll find them pretty.”

Areum makes a noncommittal sound of doubt but he still bobs his head in agreement. “I’ll try.”

“Come on, Areum! I have to pick my tent too and I refuse to be anywhere near Minjae and Rowoon,” Youngjae grumbles.

Taehyung barks out a laugh as Areum runs back to Youngjae. “We’ll either have to separate them or place their tent miles away from ours.”

“Don’t even remind me,” Youngjae winces.

With one last wave from Areum that is, to Jungkook happiness, aimed at him, Areum and Youngjae disappear within the trees, Jungkook and Taehyung soon left alone.

“Want to scout where the second hot spring is?” Taehyung proposes and rises to his feet.

“Let’s.” Jungkook hooks his arm around Taehyung’s, the two of them leisurely walking ahead. “Areum loves you, huh?”

“I have a huge soft spot for him.”

“You don’t say,” Jungkook laughs, Taehyung’s adoration for the boy evident in his softening eyes at the simple mention of the boy’s name. “Have you ever wanted kids?”

“Yes and no?” Taehyung shrugs. “I love kids but I never imagined myself in a relationship, let alone in one where I would adopt a kid, and I’m too busy to raise a child on my own.”

“But you’d like to be a father?”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook then averts his gaze. “Yeah, but I don’t think I’d be a good enough one.”

“The dozens of kids who charged at you the second you landed would beg to differ,” Jungkook retorts. “You’d make a great father. Revna can testify.” Jungkook observes with amusement the

way the tip of Taehyung's ears reddens.

"She's not my daughter," Taehyung mumbles but he doesn't sound too convinced himself.

"I certainly see her like that sometimes. Plus you and I are married, you love her, therefore if she is my daughter, she's yours too. It makes perfect sense."

"Whatever," Taehyung waves off. "You're feeling alright?"

"Hm? Yes? Why?"

"It's a lot of people you don't know and they can be overwhelming sometimes, so I was wondering."

"Were you worried about me?"

"A bit."

Jungkook bites back a smile at the admission that has easily fallen out of Taehyung's mouth. "I'm fine. Everyone has been very welcoming. I like them."

"Good."

They don't speak much after that, the two of them enjoying the temporary quietude until they stop at the second hot spring where they stay for a little while, discussing everything and anything.

This is probably all in Jungkook's head because it does not make sense otherwise.

Unless it does?

Jungkook internally sighs.

He feels watched, for lack of a better word. Unlike at the council meeting where Jungkook had been scrutinized, here it is more… curious?

Some men keep glancing at him.

There aren't many, only five that Jungkook believes to have noticed so far, and, surprisingly enough, a sixth if counting Woobin.

They continue to drift toward him as the night elapses, and Jungkook is nonplussed. He's not necessarily uncomfortable, but he certainly can't figure out why any of the six men would show this kind of interest for him — if it is what it is — considering that he's married to their leader: Taehyung.

Perhaps Jungkook is missing something there? Maybe a dragonborn tradition Taehyung has never told him about?

“What’s going on?” Jimin wonders as he appears next to Jungkook. “You’ve got that frown on your face.”

“Actually… Can we talk in private?”

After fending off some excited hatchlings, Jungkook and Jimin find themselves on the outskirts of where the group has set camp, away from any prying ears.

“I don’t know if I’ve finally lost my mind,” Jungkook starts, “but some of the men glance at me quite a lot?”

Jimin grimaces. “Yeah, I noticed too.”

“You did?” Jungkook exclaims. “Why are they? Aren’t dragonborns loyal?”

“The thing is…” Jimin trails off, peering over his shoulder at Taehyung before surveying Jungkook again. “Taehyung never scented you, right?”

"Yes? Although I'm not fully certain of what scenting equates to for dragonborns."

“Him never scenting you carves a bold *‘We aren’t mates’* on you two’s relationship. It confirms that this arranged marriage is just that: political, so their respect toward your relationship takes a bit of a hit. Dragonborns very, *very* rarely go through arranged marriages. A lot of us believe in soulmates, true love and all that nonsense, so while entering a political marriage isn’t necessarily frowned upon by us, it still weird us out because what’s the point of trapping yourself in a loveless marriage, you know? Dragonborns are deeply romantic at heart. It’s both beautiful and sad.”

“Oh,” Jungkook answers, processing the information. “Sad?”

“If a dragonborn’s mate dies, in a lot of cases, the other will die as well. We don’t handle heartbreaks very well, and the grief of a dragonborn can be as destructive as it can be fatal,” Jimin chuckles but it’s mirthless. “Mates, friends, family or marriages are for life for us. There’s a safety that comes with this unwavering loyalty, but also a possible sorrow if it’s torn apart in any way,” he adds, his gaze distant. “But yeah, it's why they’ve got their attention on you. They’re trying to gauge where you and Taehyung stand, both out of curiosity but also protectiveness toward Taehyung. And also because I feel like some of them may have fallen for your charms.”

Jungkook prances a little at the last bit. “But Taehyung must know this, no? He didn’t scent me either before the council meeting.”

“I don’t know, actually. I’m not sure he understands how meaningful and important scenting is for mates since he’s never been interested in this. I also don’t think he realizes what kind of message he is sending by not scenting you.”

“So what, these men believe they have a chance with me?”

“They’re definitely testing. And curious. I let my ears run around a bit, and apparently there’s been some talk. Many are still bewildered to see Taehyung be married to someone, and a human at that. He never hid his scorn for your kind,” Jimin says. “Some even think that the whole throwing Seungwon out of a window is a lie. Others believe he may have been forced into this marriage, and others are jealous of you and him,” he chuckles.

Jungkook sighs. “I should tell him.”

“You can.” A glint shimmers in Jimin's eyes, a devious plan certainly forming in his head. “Ooor… You can let Taehyung realize what is happening on his own and see what he’ll do.”

“He won’t do anything, not for something like that,” Jungkook says not without a preemptive sliver of disappointment.

“We’ll only know if you don’t say a word about this.”

“You’re having fun, aren’t you?”

“Witnessing first hand Taehyung struggle through his emotional constipation is always delightful.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll wait,” Jungkook laughs. “I’ll be right back, have to relieve myself.”

“Alright.”

Jimin walks back to the camp while Jungkook makes his way deeper inside the forest to find some intimacy. He takes care of his business and he doesn’t return right away, preferring to take a brief stroll through the forest.

Rustling and footsteps erupt nearby.

Jungkook tenses.

A hand on his dagger, his other one wrapped around the white scale, Jungkook stealthily makes his way toward the source of the odd noises that he soon realizes to be shuffling of clothes and grunts.

Jungkook pauses behind a tree and tilts his head to the side.

There’s a man with his back to Jungkook and what appears to be a second person carried by the first one, legs wrapped around the waist.

Jungkook squints, lost as to what is going on, however when he hears a sigh then a *moan* elevate in the air, trailed by some more rustling as the man takes off his shirt then ruts against the other person he’s holding, Jungkook promptly swivels around.

“Oh God,” Jungkook whispers to himself and — quietly — power walks back inside the camp, cheeks heated.

He collides against someone who grabs his elbow when he staggers backward.

“What’s that blush for?” Taehyung wonders.

“I’m not blushing,” Jungkook denies and frees his arm from Taehyung’s grasp.

“You are. What happened?”

“Nothing.”

Taehyung’s eyes narrow while Jungkook musters his best rendition of an innocent, confused look. “Was it Minjae and Rowoon?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook mumbles. “I just stumbled on two people having… their fun.”

“Those two idiots.” Taehyung grumbles and marches toward where Jungkook came from.

It doesn’t take long for Taehyung to walk back with two sheepish men that he smacks the back of the head off.

“We didn’t see each other for a month,” Minjae pouts, a young 20 years old man, the same age as Rowoon.

“I don’t care. Don’t get frisky now. We’ve got kids around,” Taehyung chastises.

“Which is why we went *deep* inside the forest and made sure that everyone was at the camp before we left,” Rowoon interjects with a raised finger that Taehyung smacks away. “Ow…”

“But you’re right, leader,” Minjae says and places a hand at the back of Rowoon’s neck.

“What about when everyone is asleep in the middle of the night though?” Rowoon proposes with a wiggle of his brow that Taehyung groans at. He bursts into laughter. “Kidding, kidding. Don’t pop a vein. That scowl reminds me of Minsoo,” he adds with a shudder.

“I’ll be worse than my grandfather if you don’t keep it in your pants."

“Yes sir,” Minjae and Rowoon say in unison.

Minjae and Rowoon greet Jungkook with smiles as they pass by him to join the others huddled at the campfires. Their walk is more of an awkward waddle because of how Minjae wraps his arms around Rowoon’s waist, his face buried in his boyfriend’s — *or mate?* — neck. They even share a tender and languid kiss and while Jungkook isn’t a prude per se, such audacious displays of love are still unfamiliar to him.

Jungkook can’t help but wonder how kissing someone like this would feel, where sharing this kind of affection isn’t born from a pretense.

“Come on,” Taehyung says, tearing Jungkook away from his wandering thoughts. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Yeah.” Jungkook lets himself be guided by the hand Taehyung places on his lower back.

The two of them find a place on a log, the group beginning to feast on their dinner in preparation for tomorrow.

Jungkook looks around, searching for a small head that he finds in a quiet spot away from the brouhaha near the campfires.

Areum is sitting next to Aecha and Areum must say something funny because Aecha’s coy expression breaks into a grin. Areum stares at the girl, a starstruck look on his face.

“They’re so cute,” Jungkook says to Taehyung who’s also peering at the pair.

“They are.”

“How did you know they would get along well?”

“Aecha is fascinated by arcanes, so I knew Areum’s breaths wouldn’t spook her away and that it’d be a good subject to breach the ice,” Taehyung says and tosses the rest of his chicken bone behind him to grab his metal cup of water. “Areum's a good kid. He shouldn’t be castigated simply because he’s one of a kind or will grow to be a powerful dragon.”

Jungkook stares at Taehyung because this is all he can do, really.

God…

Jungkook is hit by an unexpected wave of affection for Taehyung.

He kind of wants to kiss the dragonborn but he doesn’t know if he wants to do it on the cheek, the temple, the forehead or somewhere else. However he has an irrepressible urge to touch Taehyung, and so he greedily does so as he curls a hand around Taehyung’s thigh. “You’re…”

“What?” Taehyung says amidst another bite of chicken.

Jungkook opens his mouth to speak but someone interrupts him to inquire about Amaris.

The rest of the night elapses in peace, the dragonborns ravaging a mind-boggling amount of chicken and beef.

Jungkook remains by Taehyung’s side. He glances at Minjae and Rowoon every now and then, and he pretends that the bitter squeeze in his chest is due to the cold.

“What’s that?”

“I assumed you’d want to join us for the hunt?” Taehyung answers Jungkook.

“I’d love to, if it isn't bothersome.”

“You never are,” Taehyung distractedly says and Jungkook muffles his smile against Taehyung’s shoulder that he’s leaning against. “This harness is for you,” he explains as he and Jungkook help spread out the heavy, huge metal chains. It has smaller, leather parts at the center with human sized buckles and belts. “They’ll attach it around my chest and shoulders so you can safely ride on my back.”

“Aww, look at our leader being such a thoughtful husband!” Someone chides, punctuated by a series of whistles.

“Shut the duck up and get ready,” Taehyung mutters.

Jungkook has noticed with a wave of endearment how since they’ve arrived here, Taehyung hasn’t sworn once, the dragonborn keeping a tight rein on his cursing around the children.

“Are you really alright with me flying on your back?” Jungkook whispers at Taehyung. “Or with having chains around you?”

“Mhm. I am.”

Jungkook pecks Taehyung’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing,” Taehyung says, even if he and Jungkook both know it isn’t.

After gathering the last wandering kids, everyone faces Taehyung and waits.

The levity from yesterday is gone, a certain seriousness taking over the group.

“Insung and I checked earlier this morning, and the griffins have not moved from their spot,” Taehyung begins. "You kids will lead the tracking searches. Once the hatchlings found the griffins’ lair, the adults will begin the hunt. The members of my squadron and myself will remain at a distance, however we’ll be ready to intervene if needed.“

“How big are those griffins?” Someone asks.

“A third my size,” Taehyung says.

“Holy f— Duck,” Rowoon corrects himself at a glare from Taehyung.

“Remember all you’ve learned, communicate with each other, listen to my directives during the hunt, and you’ll be fine,” Taehyung reassures.

“This is nerve wracking.”

“Also keep in mind that the goal isn’t to simply secure the hunt, it’s to optimize the kill: make it quick while remaining unharmed and provoking as little damage to the hunt as possible. That means no breaths of any kind unless they’re snaring ones. What else should you be careful with?”

“Not damaging the griffin’s poison pouch in their chest,” a kid says and Taehyung nods with a smile.

“Exactly,” Taehyung says. “Any question?” No hand raises, most of the queries having been asked already this morning. “If everyone’s ready, let’s fly.”

The group begins to shift to their dragon forms, Taehyung included, who casts an endless shadow over the camp as he rises on his limbs. The chains are rapidly secured around him and once done, Taehyung lifts Jungkook from the ground to bring his talon near his head.

Jungkook crawls on trembling limbs to where his harness awaits him, sitting up against one of Taehyung’s spikes lining up his spine. Jungkook, along with Jimin’s help, attaches the belts and buckles around his chest, verifying three times that they are safely fastened and then a fourth just in case but also a fifth because maybe he didn’t properly check the previous four times.

“Have fun up there,” Jimin grins. “All set! We can leave!” He says and leaps down, turning to dragon mid air.

Taehyung propels himself away from the ground.

Jungkook squeaks at the swoop that flickers in his stomach from the motion. It’s different from being held in Taehyung’s talon. Here, Jungkook can sense the way Taehyung’s wings bat up and

down, the way the gargantuan body tilts backward to fly upward, or how impossibly colossal Taehyung is in his dragon form.

Jungkook presses himself against the spike behind him, eyes firmly kept shut as he deeply inhales and exhales. “Fuck." When Taehyung huffs in response, the movement jostles Jungkook on his seat. Jungkook peels his eyes open in time to see the gigantic, white dragon head twist around. “What if the harness breaks and I fall and your claws pierce through me when you try to catch me?”

Taehyung snorts, the sound coming off amused from where he’s hovering in the sky.

“I’m serious. What if? That’d be a horrible way to go. And painful. I don’t want to die painfully.”

Taehyung pins Jungkook with a deadpan stare — because Taehyung manages to convey every bit of his exasperation even through his reptile features — and he throws a minuscule ball of lightning at Jungkook that the latter avoids in time.

“You’ll catch me, right?”

Taehyung’s head inches closer as he nods. He bumps his snout against Jungkook’s chest.

Jungkook relaxes a bit when he sprawls a hand on the muzzle. “Alright. I’m ready.”

Taehyung does not warn Jungkook when he pushes on his wings and begins to drift higher and faster toward their destination. The rest of the thunder is already swarming the sky, the hatchlings playing together or pestering one of the hunters before darting away.

Jungkook refuses to look below him and Taehyung. He also refuses to peer anywhere *at all* when Taehyung’s speed grows. Gusts of wind billow around Jungkook, his winter coat that he had haphazardly tossed over his shoulders snapping on his sides and threatening to be thrown off of him.

He counts in his head, down from 60 then up again and it’s at the fourth rendition that something nudges his arm.

Jungkook startles, his eyes flying open.

He stares at the small dragon — Naya — that lands on Taehyung’s head and runs down the long neck to halt in front of Jungkook. The brown hatchling flops on her belly and the round eyes expectantly peer up at Jungkook.

Jungkook isn’t sure of what Naya wants, but he ends up shakily patting the crown and the skin feels different than from Taehyung’s velvety scales, this one more rocky and sand-like. The hatchling makes a little noise as she closes her eyes and when Jungkook focuses at a spot behind her ear, her hind legs scratch at her side in response.

Seemingly satisfied that her demand has been fulfilled, Naya springs on her talons and resumes her race down Taehyung’s back, zig-zagging between the high, white spikes.

Jungkook notices then how more than half of the hatchlings are occupying Taehyung’s back. Some of them playfully fight together while others tumble up and down Taehyung’s wings whenever they move, one of the hatchlings completely falling off however reappearing seconds later.

The dizziness from being so high up in the sky ebbs away more and more, so much so that Jungkook becomes a little bolder.

He has some kind of thinner chain attached to the harness that grants him some leeway if he wishes to move around without risking a fall. So, after a self motivational speech and a pat on Taehyung's scales, Jungkook slowly rises on his knees.

He shuffles forward to wrap his arms around the spike and he hangs onto it as he fully stands on his feet. He glances down.

The forest is nothing but a sea of green under them with the haphazard breaks here and there from where some rivers or ponds can be seen. The wind whistles in his ears as he darts his head around and they're so far up at this distance that all that encompasses Jungkook is an endless expanse of blue and white from the sparse clouds.

Most importantly, Jungkook can watch the thunder that surrounds him and Taehyung.

The dragons display an array of colors and sizes: some red, black or beige, while others have more distinct features on them like Jimin with the metal spikes crowning his head or another dragon with ice like wings that are so transparent Jungkook can see through the skin. Many fly by Jungkook to chirp or make some small roars at him and Jungkook responds with waves, stroke on a snout or laughter when Jimin nips at a dragon's rear who chases after him seconds later.

The sight is impossibly majestic, and Jungkook breathes out a chuckle, overwhelmed with the happiness of being accepted within the thunder.

Jungkook glances over his shoulder at the dozens of hatchlings that look so tiny compared to Taehyung's gargantuan size.

An idea pops in his head, perhaps a little insane.

"Taehyung," Jungkook shouts. Taehyung's head turns to peer at him, the pupil a thin slit in the middle of the golden honey. The reptile features of the dragon do not resemble Taehyung's human face in any way, yet there is something about it that is *so Taehyung* and unmistakably him. "I'm untying the harness!"

Taehyung quirks a nonexistent brow, the thick lid above his eye lifting. He makes a sound that Jungkook can't really decipher but Taehyung nods nonetheless.

Reassured with Taehyung's attention on him, Jungkook tentatively releases his grip of the spike. He steadies his footing and it's made easier by the way Taehyung smoothly glides through the air, his wings now immobile.

Jungkook unties the belts' buckles around his chest and shoulders, the harness falling limply while his winter cloak is blown away in the sky.

"God… Okay… Okay. This is okay. He'll catch me, it's fine."

Jungkook extends his hand toward a spike as he begins to precariously make his way down Taehyung's spine, passing in-between the shoulders. "I'm fi—" A squeak dies in Jungkook's throat when Taehyung lightly shakes himself. Jungkook's already wobbly legs cave under his weight as

he falls on his knees. Jungkook's head swivels around to glare at the dragon. "Taehyung you prick!"

Fire puffs out of Taehyung's nostrils when he snorts.

"Prick," Jungkook shouts a second time for good measure. He stands up once more and this time, instead of aiding himself with the spikes, he braces himself with the hatchling that rushes toward him and presents his back to him. "Thank you," he smiles.

He soon reaches the middle of Taehyung's back and he collapses on his rear there, leaning forward on his hands. "I did it. That wasn't too bad," he says to himself but one of the hatchlings must hear him because a wet tongue licks at the side of his face followed by a snout that nudges him. "Thank you but let's not drown me in saliva," Jungkook chuckles.

The rest of the small dragons crowd Jungkook, those that had been playing on Taehyung's wings greeting him with little sounds, tail bumps and forehead rubbing.

Jungkook shuffles to sit crossed, steadying himself when Taehyung's wings resume their motions. There's still a sliver of unease within Jungkook, however it's abated by the hatchlings that stay with him, two of them framing him on each side.

A spike of concern flashes in him at some point when a larger hatchling motions at Jungkook to climb on his back. The young dragon whines and rolls on his back when Jungkook shakes his head. "I'll stay on Taehyung's back for this trip, but maybe another time I'll ride with you."

The hatchling huffs but complies nonetheless, walking away with a dejected slump in the shoulders that doesn't last for very long, soon replaced by an evident glee as he does some tricks in the air and pumps his chest when Jungkook excitedly claps. It soon turns into some kind of competition between the hatchlings, trying to one up each other and bring out the best reaction out of Jungkook.

It's fun, Jungkook thinks with an emotion that stifles his throat.

Jungkook flops on his back, arms spread by his sides as he admires the sky above and enjoys the spectacle the bickering hatchlings are painting above him, a sense of dizzying freedom washing over him.

The first part of the hunt elapses incredibly well.

Taehyung remains in his dragon form in the sky, surveying the kids from above that run, walk or crawl through the forest as they sniff around and discuss together. Laid on his stomach on Taehyung's shoulder, Jungkook snickers when Taehyung tries to purposefully mislead the kids. However the teams never fall to his shenanigans, managing to distinguish the track of the griffins' scents in spite of Taehyung's disturbances.

It takes around 20 minutes for the kids to locate the griffins' lair, which isn't nearly as long as Jungkook would have expected it to take.

Taehyung must be thinking the same because Jungkook can quite literally feel how content the dragonborn is when the latter's body quivers with a rumble that shakes through Jungkook. He lands on the ground at some point and a swarm of hatchlings run toward him.

Taehyung emits some more vocalizations that Jungkook understands to be praises if the way the hatchlings happily chirps and growls back is any indication, Taehyung and the young dragons nudging foreheads in mute approval and affection.

Minutes later, the second phase of the hunt begins.

Jungkook is instructed by Jimin to attach himself on the harness again, and Jungkook promptly does so.

The hatchlings are all gathered on Yeji and Mira's backs, this group remaining afar while the second one consisting of the novice and seasoned hunters advances toward the lair.

High pitched screeches erupt in the silence. They're trailed by some rustles in the leaves then of trees breaking and falling. Soon enough, three large creatures break out of the forest to dart into the sky and fly away at a rapid pace.

The hunt starts.

Jungkook scrutinizes with barely contained fascination the sheer amount of work, coordination and trust that occurs before his eyes. The four teams work in tandem into isolating the griffins from one another, all following their team leaders and Taehyung's instructions.

There are a few near hiccups here and there but the team leaders rectify the scant errors before anything grievous can happen.

What impresses Jungkook the most is how Taehyung has an eye on everything: he directs the teams if need be with vocalizations, he moves ahead of time when one of the griffins narrowly misses its attack thanks to him. Taehyung somehow succeeds in predicting what, when and where a mistake is about to be made.

It's attractive, really, how competent of a leader Taehyung is in spite of what some may assume, and Jungkook is mesmerized by the display of skill and intelligence.

The kills are executed less than 10 minutes later.

The group erupts into roars and clicks of tongue as they rejoice of their successful hunt, and Taehyung lets them have this moment of joy as he gathers the griffins into nets.

When they get back to the camp three hours later as evening has begun, the group helps Taehyung untie the chains of the harness. The griffins are dropped under some tree's cover.

Exclamations follow suit from everyone, the kids cheering each other and raving about how well they've done and how *'cool and badass'* the hunt had been.

Taehyung rounds up everyone at the campfire minutes later to discuss the hunt, what can be improved on, and touch on the mistakes that have been made. Then, Taehyung dedicates the rest of the conversation to detailing everything that has been done correctly, not shying away from praising the great teamwork and rewarding the happy kids with head pats and smiles.

Taehyung has this ecstatic, palpable pride that colors and brightens his face as he watches the group chat together. He probably needed this: to reconvene with his people, like Jungkook had needed too.

The next hour trickles with the group winding down and relaxing while some take care of the griffins and work on removing the poison pouch from the chest under the team leaders' guidance. Jungkook joins the click led by Insung who levels him with a wary stare.

"May I help?" Jungkook inquires, unbothered by the dead griffin.

"Help? *You*?" Insung says, incredulous. "You'd have to dirty your hands with blood, Prince."

"I have before. It's no trouble." If Insung was aware of the carnage Jungkook had rained down back at the manor when he had raised the dead, the man wouldn't be so dubious of Jungkook's assurance.

Insung agrees either way, and so Jungkook aids in the task. He uses his dagger to deftly carve through griffin and remove the poison pouch in near surgical accuracy.

Insung is clearly impressed, his brows high up his forehead. "Aright, alright. You know a thing or two, uh?"

"More like dozens," Jungkook jests and he smiles when it elicits a laugh out of Insung. He stills when he feels a hand cup his nape. His head turns, met with Taehyung's gaze. "Hi," Jungkook foolishly says but Taehyung replies with a *'Hey'* back.

"How is it going?" Taehyung asks, glancing between Jungkook and Insung.

"Surprisingly good. Seems like your husband isn't like some of those posh, pompous humans," Insung says.

"Well…" Taehyung starts with a grimace. Jungkook pins him with a warning look and Taehyung tongues at his cheek, doing nothing to conceal the taunting curl of his lips. "He doesn't mind this kind of stuff at all."

"I can see that," Insung grumbles and breathes a ball of icy wind that freezes the poison pouch. "He cut that pouch better than I do. Infuriating."

Taehyung laughs at Insung then peers at Jungkook. "Is that so?"

"I think I've done pretty well," Jungkook proudly says and sinks a bit against Taehyung when the fingers cupping his nape knead at the flesh.

"Yeah," Taehyung rasps. He reduces what distance is left between him and Jungkook to peck Jungkook's temple. "You did, not only with the pouch," he says against Jungkook's skin before leaning back, and Jungkook understands that Taehyung is referring to the flight in itself.

Jungkook ducks his head, repeating like a mantra in his head that it is all for the pretense. "Thank you," he still answers, unable to tame down the way his heart speeds up at the proximity he and Taehyung share.

Taehyung wordlessly walks away after this.

“Fucking hell,” Insung says. “Never would’ve have thought I’d see Taehyung be all lovey-dovey with someone like that.”

“I— I mean he’s not lovey-dovey, he’s just really nice,” Jungkook stammers and washes the blood of his hands in a bowl of water.

“Whatever you say, Prince,” Insung deflects. “Ya gonna help me with the other pouch?”

“Of course! Lead the way.”

Taehyung looks exhausted, which makes sense with the hunt and the long back and forth flight he has spent carrying the hatchlings. Jungkook hopes that nothing else is planned for the remainder of the night and tomorrow so that Taehyung can properly rest.

Jungkook worries about Taehyung, however. The dragonborn has seemed tired for the past few days, and Jungkook wonders what the cause could be. He knows it’s not the plague, because Taehyung would have already, at best, shown symptoms of it, and at worst died from it. So the reason is something else, and Jungkook can’t figure out what it is.

Perhaps it’s nightmares? But Jungkook would have woken up from them. He and Taehyung have been sleeping in the same bed since they’ve gotten back from the manor, after all.

Or maybe Taehyung’s tiredness is due to the seal on his hemomancy breath, Jungkook muses. Taehyung’s body and arcane may have difficulty adjusting to the absent breath.

Nevertheless, Jungkook is a little concerned and wants to take care of Taehyung but doesn’t know how to do so. He and Taehyung haven’t gotten the chance to talk much since the trip started, Taehyung’s attention commandeered by the kids.

Jungkook feels a little needy but makes no mention of it.

“Hey,” someone says, and Jungkook recognizes the man as Jaewook, the latter accompanied by a certain Donghee, if Jungkook remembers correctly. “I don’t think we’ve properly met?”

“We haven’t,” Jungkook smiles. He keeps to himself the fact that the two men are part of those that have been gauging him since the beginning. He glances at Taehyung who's at the other side of the camp, conversing with some people. “I’m Jungkook, Taehyung’s husband.”

“Husband…” Jaewook echoes, and he doesn’t come off as scornful or anything like that, but there’s an interest in his gaze that ruffles Jungkook’s feathers. “Still surreal, isn’t it?”

Donghee barks out a laugh. “Fuck yeah. How’s the marriage even going with Taehyung?” He asks and winces when Jaewook elbows him in the ribs.

“Great,” Jungkook says, entertained by the lack of subtlety. “He’s good to me. Better than anyone else could be,” he adds in a purposeful taunt.

“That’s surprising,” Jaewook comments. “We never saw that one coming. The marriage, I mean.”

“Why so?”

“Because he never dated anyone."

“Well it is an arranged marriage there,” Donghee chirps in. “So not really dating.”

“True, true,” Jaewook nods.

Jungkook leans against the tree behind him and watches the two young men swim through their clearly rehearsed dialogues. “The fact that it started as an arranged union does not take away from the fact that Taehyung is my husband, and that I deeply care about him.”

“Yeah, but…” Jaewook looks over his shoulders then back at Jungkook and he leans forward as he whispers “Are you two, like, in love or something? ‘Cause it’d be really flabbergasting if yes.”

“Even Haneul was flabbergasted,” Donghee says.

“ *Everyone* was flabbergasted.”

Jungkook’s scoff at Haneul’s mentions is drowned by a much louder, mocking one.

“Haneul’s delusional,” Woobin says, nursing a drink.

Jaewook and Donghee’s demeanor tense as they glower at the newcomer.

“The fuck do you want, Woobin?” Jaewook snips. “Can’t believe Taehyung agreed to your annoying ass being here.”

“Don’t you miss your minions?” Donghee continues “Where’s Minho?”

“Don’t you have better things to do like preparing the meat for tonight before the baths?” Woobin deflects. “Or maybe I should tell Taehyung you’re being awfully curious about his husband. I’d love to see how he’d react.”

“Going!"

“Yup, yup, yup,” Donghee says and hurries away with Jaewook. “Bye!”

Woobin sighs. “Idiots.”

“You say this like you haven’t been giving me similar looks as theirs,” Jungkook says and walks toward the row of large boulders that have been cut at the top to serve as some makeshift tables. He pauses in front of one to pour himself a glass of water flavored with some cherry.

“So what, dear prince?” Woobin says and halts on Jungkook’s right. “Am I not allowed to look at handsome men, taken or not?”

Jungkook takes a spoon to twirl his drink. “I see you’ve gotten your father’s shamelessness."

Woobin grimaces. “Let’s not mention him.”

“What do you want, Woobin? I know there’s a reason for…” Jungkook vaguely motions between them. “This.”

“I want to talk to you!” Woobin grins, overly enthusiastic as he leans his hip against the rock.

Jungkook sips on his drink for a few seconds, pondering on his options. “What do you want to know?” He says, deciding to entertain the conversation for a little while.

“Everything about you is a good start,” Woobin replies with a charming curl to his lips and tilt of his head that would most likely work on anyone that is not Jungkook.

“You’re cocky.”

“Your bracelet fell.”

Jungkook peers down at his wrist, and the silver jewelry that had been there lays on the boulder next to a bowl of blueberries. He’ll have to ask Taehyung to tie it back for him, Jungkook thinks. He makes a move to pluck the bracelet, however another hand grabs it before he can.

Jungkook glances at Woobin.

“Dear prince,” Woobin says with a light bow, hair curling over his forehead and eyes, his gaze playful, “may I tie it for you?”

Jungkook stares at Woobin. “Sure,” he says and presents his hand to Woobin, mostly amused at the theatrics but a part of him is annoyed at Woobin’s impudence that occurs in the absence of a certain dragonborn.

Woobin’s palm coils around Jungkook’s forearm to turn the hand upside down. He slides the bracelet around and fiddles with the clasp, his fingers bumping on Jungkook’s inner wrist every now and then.

It’s different from Taehyung.

An admittedly handsome man is touching Jungkook and being friendly, even if bold. It *does* feel kinda nice. It feeds Jungkook with those biscuits he had once mentioned to Taehyung. Yet Jungkook’s thoughts drift toward Taehyung.

Woobin is gentle as he fastens the bracelet, but Taehyung is even more.

Taehyung’s fingers and palms have more calluses than Woobin’s. They’re warmer too and the nails are always neatly trimmed, Jungkook ever so endeared by the care Taehyung puts into them for some reasons.

Taehyung’s hands also protect Jungkook in so many different ways, whether it being when they draw blood, when they cradle Jungkook’s nape, or when they simply hold him, where Jungkook’s entire mind and soul experience a safety they haven’t known very often.

Taehyung’s hands grant Jungkook a plethora of goods, whereas Woobin’s and anyone else’s are simply… there.

Someone new is touching Jungkook, and it’s odd how it contradictorily worsens his avarice.

Perhaps it is because the beast that is Jungkook’s greed has grown ravenous solely for the fare Taehyung provides.

A shiver walks its crawling fingertips down Jungkook's spine when his mind clouds over with reminiscences of his and Taehyung's visit to Amaris' library, of when Taehyung had shown what Jungkook would like to believe to be greed. Taehyung's hands had been tentative yet curious. And so daring. It had felt so blissful, and the beast within Jungkook yearns to feast on more.

Sometimes Jungkook daydreams about Taehyung washing him. It's foolish, maybe childish too, but Jungkook can't help it when he imagines the soft washcloth being brushed down his arms, his back and chest, then replaced by hands that would scratch at his scalp and clean his hair.

More often than not, lately, Jungkook gets lost thinking of a world where his greed would find its match with Taehyung.

"All set," Woobin says, bringing Jungkook back to the present moment.

Jungkook blinks away the haze in his vision. "Thank you."

"You didn't answer their question."

"Hm?"

"Jaewook and Donghee's."

"Why do you care about the answer?" Jungkook curls his arm around his own chest, his body crawling with a prickling discomfort all of a sudden. He shouldn't have let Woobin touch him.

"I'm nosy," Woobin shrugs.

"A trait you and Jimin surely share."

"That still doesn't answer me, dear prince."

Jungkook despises how his title sounds when uttered by Woobin, and the way it reads like a reminder of how he'd prefer to hear it on Taehyung's tongue.

Jungkook is about to dismiss the question, done with the conversation and wishing to be left alone, however he stills when he feels a familiar hand at the dip of his back, trailed by a smoky scent.

The prickling on his skin dissipates.

"Everything alright?" Taehyung says from where he's now standing behind Jungkook. He shuffles to the right and half wedges himself between Woobin and Jungkook as he extends his free arm to pluck a blueberry.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung.

There isn't a sliver of friendliness in Taehyung's gaze, his attitude cold in spite of the apparent nonchalance he displays. But Jungkook knows his husband, and he can catch onto the telltale signs of Taehyung's flaring temper, one of them being the way Taehyung's fingers tighten around Jungkook's waist.

"Jungkook is a delightful company," Woobin grins.

"They need your help" Taehyung nods to the side.

“Why are you here, then?” Woobin fires back.

“Careful,” is all that Taehyung says, however the rasped word retains a warning so potent that Woobin’s assurance falters, and Jungkook relishes in it.

Woobin promptly regains his composure and downright smirks as he surveys Jungkook. “I’ll see you later, dear prince." His arm inches toward Jungkook. It’s about to hold onto Jungkook’s wrist, the same one where the bracelet had been reattached.

Thankfully, Jungkook does not need to recoil away from the approaching touch when he has a watchful dragon by his side.

“I don’t know what it is about you and your pig of a father trying to provoke me at every breath you take,” Taehyung starts, his hand gripping onto Woobin’s wrist before it gets anywhere near Jungkook, “however I’ll happily give you a reminder like I had done with Seungwon.”

Woobin’s levity vanishes from his face. He rips his hand out of Taehyung’s clamp and takes a step back, his brows knitted around a glower. Woobin rubs at his wrist where Jungkook can see a faint reddish tint. “You should worry about reminding others of some more important things,” he says with a glance at Jungkook. Then he swivels on his feet and strides off.

Taehyung heaves a grunt.

Jungkook swallows back a complaint when the dragonborn removes his arm from Jungkook’s waist.

“Piece of shit,” Taehyung says, quiet enough to not be heard by any of the kids that are grouped somewhere else. He munches on some more blueberries while studying Jungkook. His eyes narrow. “Has he touched you?” Taehyung asks, and when Jungkook nods, Taehyung’s features set into an unreadable stare. “Where.”

“My arm. He helped me fasten my bracelet." What semblance of annoyance that had risen in Jungkook changes, becoming something hopeful, although he's not certain what he's hoping for. “Why?”

Taehyung holds Jungkook’s arm and he lifts the wrist to his nose. He sniffs it once. “You reek of him,” he concludes and lets go.

Jungkook brings his hand to his own nose. When he smells his arm, he doesn’t pick up on anything particular. “Do I?”

“Fucker did it on purpose.” Taehyung clicks his tongue. He glares in Woobin’s direction but it’s dampened by his tousled, fluffy hair that he cards a hand through.

“Did what?”

“Not so discreetly scent you.”

“What?”

“You smell more of him than you do of me,” Taehyung scoffs and peers ahead at the forest. “And Jimin expects me to be accepting of Woobin when that fucker tries to piss me off for no reason other than being an absolute rat,” he mutters while serving himself a cup of water.

But why would Woobin's scenting annoy Taehyung?

“Does this rat not realize I could very well banish him from Vanae for doing something like that?” Taehyung continues and grumbles to himself some more, only quieting when he tosses more blueberries in his mouth.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t notice what he was doing,” Jungkook says, fiddling with his wedding ring.

“Hm? It’s not your fault,” Taehyung says, the sharp edges in his timber softening. “Woobin knows better than to do this.”

Jungkook steps closer to Taehyung, and after making sure that no one is eavesdropping on their conversation, he says “I think it’s another instance of our pretense being apparently abysmal around dragonborns.”

“I know… Partially because I never scented you. It’s something mates do, but… I didn’t think it’d be that big of a deal if we don’t do it. I guess I was wrong.”

“What does it mean if you don’t scent me?”

“That I don’t see you as a mate, I suppose? I don’t really know,” Taehyung shrugs, confirming Jimin’s earlier assumption.

“Maybe you could scent me?” Jungkook blurts out, too fast for him to renege the inane offer. Taehyung probably wouldn’t do this even to nurture the pretense. From the little bits he had seen through Dahee and Junhyun and Taehyung’s family in general, scenting is quite an intimate affair.

“Yeah. Maybe,” Taehyung says without much conviction. He yawns and lazily blinks, then his gaze drifts on Jungkook where it stays for a while.

Jungkook averts his eyes and holds his cup to occupy his hands. “What?”

“You shuddered when he touched you.”

Jungkook’s heart skips a beat. Out of what, he does not know. Perhaps a dazed anticipation. “It tickled when he looped the bracelet.” It isn’t a lie, but it isn’t the full truth either.

Taehyung catches onto it. He hums a brief, sardonic chuckle. “Right.”

“ *What?”* Jungkook reiterates but this time with more temper. Taehyung quirks a brow at him. “What is it?” Jungkook mumbles through a pout.

Taehyung says nothing for a moment, a hand in his pants’ pocket, the other around his cup that he presses on his mouth. His index repeatedly taps against the edge of the cup while he peers ahead without seemingly seeing anything. When Taehyung eventually speaks, Jungkook holds his breath.

“He can give you loaves of bread.”

Jungkook stills.

“Anyone can give you bread, actually, and I don’t know why I’m only realizing it now.”

“They can give me biscuits, not bread.” Jungkook feels a little dizzy from the surge of misplaced hope that floods him. He hesitantly holds onto Taehyung, his hand looping around the arm.

“What would you call what Woobin gave you?”

“A biscuit with a bitter aftertaste,” Jungkook says to lighten the mood and it works, Taehyung’s lips twitching.

“Did you like it when he touched your wrist?”

“It was kinda nice, at first, but then it… It wasn’t anymore,” Jungkook settles on saying. “My mind was elsewhere.”

“I see.”

Jungkook surveys Taehyung, noticing how the gaze is veiled with an irritation that is echoed by the downturned lips. “Are you annoyed?”

“Doesn’t matter."

“Are you?”

Taehyung’s eyes snap to Jungkook's. “I said it doesn’t matter.”

“And I’m asking a question.”

“What will the answer give you?”

“Understanding.”

“Just—” Taehyung looks away and shakes his head. “Try not to let Woobin scent you. Unless that’s what you want.”

“Is this why you’re annoyed? Because he scented me?”

Taehyung does not reply.

It’s *wrong.* Taehyung being so bothered shouldn’t make Jungkook this happy. It shouldn’t, because Taehyung is visibly irked and upset and Jungkook should try to soothe the dragonborn, yet all that Jungkook wants to do is push and push and *know*.

“Is it?” Jungkook presses. “Taehy—”

“Anyone can give you bread.”

Jungkook’s fingers clench around Taehyung’s arm. He breathes out through his mouth, his eyes set on Taehyung. “No. Only you can.”

Taehyung emits a sound of doubt. “They are different kinds of bread.”

The hope that had been weakly flickering within Jungkook awakens the beast of his greed. It perks up. Alert. Because what if the bane of Taehyung’s ire is—

What if—

“Would it bother you if someone else gives me bread?”

Taehyung frees his arm from Jungkook’s grip and faces away from him. “Everyone’s ready for the baths,” he says as he begins to make his way toward the campfire.

Jungkook leaves his cup on the boulder and swiftly catches up to Taehyung. He seizes Taehyung’s wrist and tugs on it strongly enough to pull the dragonborn toward him. “Would it?”

Taehyung’s gaze darts between Jungkook and the onlookers watching the scene with barely concealed interest. Taehyung’s jaw clenches and Jungkook can tell that Taehyung is about to flee from the conversation once and for all.

So Jungkook moves first.

He pivots the two of them around so that Taehyung’s back is to the group while Jungkook is trapped between Taehyung and a tree that he reclines against.

“Ignore them. It's just us.” Jungkook drags his palms along Taehyung’s wrists, reveling in the lack of rejection even when he kneads circles that he hopes to be calming on the tense forearms. “I'd like to know the answer, Tae. Please.”

Taehyung exhales a heavy, petulant sigh that Jungkook chuckles at. He peers at a point behind Jungkook, a disgruntled twist to his mouth.

Then, in a small — *shy?* — motion, Taehyung nods.

Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip. “Why would it annoy you?”

“Because… They’re… My loaves…”

A silence floats between them.

“Elders, I sound like a stupid child,” Taehyung mutters and drags a palm down his face. Taehyung is close enough for Jungkook to drop his head atop Taehyung’s shoulder and muffle his laughter against it. “Yeah. Keep mocking me. It’s not like I’m already annoyed, Viper.”

“They *are* yours,” Jungkook says and straightens up, finding Taehyung’s miffed gaze seconds later. “I wouldn’t want anyone else’s.”

“You say that now but you never know.”

Jungkook doesn’t bother hiding his smile this time. The feeble hope sings in his chest, sustained by Taehyung’s temper. “Taehyung,” Jungkook *giggles*. “You’re an idiot.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, because I told you only you can give me the bread I want.”

“Say that again minus the metaphor because it doesn’t come close to what it actually is about,” Taehyung says with a certain seriousness, his gaze hardening. “You shuddered when he touched you. It’ll probably happen with someone else again, which is fine because I did tell you in the cave that there’s someone out there who’s greedy to feed your greed.”

“But not Woobin.”

“I chose him as an example. I’m talking in general.”

A deep seated, satiated contentment oscillates within Jungkook.

He may be interpreting it all wrong, and perhaps this time it *is* all in his head, however Taehyung sounds… selfish. It reads like wishful thinking in Jungkook’s head, a desire that is a little shameful yet a lot pleased. Jungkook won’t go as far as to believe that Taehyung is jealous, however…

He wouldn’t mind it to be true.

“Taehyung,” Jungkook starts and only continues once his gaze locks with Taehyung’s. “I don’t know what kind of delusion you’re creating in your mind right now,” he says and ignores Taehyung’s stony look, “but I can assure you that you’re the only one who ever managed to feed my greed.”

“I doubt that.”

“You can doubt it all you want, but it’s true.”

“Then what’s the difference between my touch and Woobin’s? Because this is what those loaves are all about: physical contact.”

“No, they aren’t,” Jungkook says through an incredulous laugh because Taehyung can be so oblivious. “They’re about affection, yes, but they’re also about attention, care, curiosity and loyalty. They’re about a… A connection.” *They’re about us*, Jungkook does not dare say out loud. “They’re not just about a hand on my nape. I can get that from anyone.”

Taehyung remains silent, then he says “What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that when he touched me, all I could think of was how I wanted it to be you. I shuddered because my thoughts had trailed back to when *you* brushed my back at Amaris’ library. I __”

Jungkook pauses, apprehension squeezing his throat because what if he’s being too much? What if he’s being too greedy again?

“*‘It’s nice, but it does not compare to how good it feels when it’s Taehyung’,”* Jungkook continues, his nerves flaring up and timber hoarse. *“‘I want to hold Taehyung’s arm’, ‘Ah, I wish it was Taehyung’s hands instead.’* Those were the only things in my mind, Taehyung."

The *‘You were’* isn’t said, yet it rings loud between Jungkook’s ears.

Taehyung looks taken aback, so much so that he doesn’t speak a word for what feels like an eternity. He doesn’t seem agitated anymore, at least. However he still does not reply when he crosses the distance to curl an arm around Jungkook’s waist and pull him close. He guides Jungkook with a hand on his lower back, prompting him to walk forward with him.

The camp is now empty for the most part aside from a couple of hunters that have stayed behind, most of the group having left to wash in the hot springs.

They make their way through the forest, and when not a single answer leaves Taehyung as a few minutes trickles by, Jungkook shrugs Taehyung off and marches ahead.

“Jung—”

“It’d be nice if you said something back. Anything,” Jungkook snips, heart aching. “Doesn’t matter if it’s rejection. It’s better than ignorance.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Jungkook halts. His head turns.

Taehyung has stopped as well.

“How unusual,” Jungkook says and it's petty and unjustified, spiked with a derision that he hides when he faces away from Taehyung to resume his walk, but it was a lot to share with Taehyung, and his vulnerability being met with *nothing* is upsetting.

He spoke too much again.

He doesn't know why he even thought for one fleeting second that Taehyung could—

“Wait.”

Jungkook pauses when a hand grabs his wrist and he begrudgingly pivots to face Taehyung.

“I genuinely don’t know what to say,” Taehyung repeats but it’s a little quieter, his eyes wavering between Jungkook’s. “I’m confused.”

“You—” Jungkook pulls his wrist free. Taehyung’s lips press into a thin line as he takes a step back. “You don’t have to wrack your head on giving me lengthy, eloquent responses. But saying *something* is better than nothing when I… When I open up to you. You can just tell me how you feel, if it made you uncomfortable or angry or— Or I don’t know what else and—”

“I liked it.”

Jungkook’s eyes dart on Taehyung’s that are aimed at anywhere but Jungkook.

“What you said,” Taehyung clarifies and there’s a frown knitting his brows and pinching his lips. “I don’t know why. So I’m confused, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to reply to all you’ve said.”

“There isn’t anything specific that you’re supposed to say. You don’t have to wax poetry at me, although I wouldn’t mind it,” Jungkook quips and Taehyung’s mouth curves with the tiniest smile. “Hearing that you liked it is enough for me. It makes me happy, and not as if I’ve been dismissed.”

“Yeah, I’ll keep it in mind,” Taehyung says, and Jungkook knows that he will. Taehyung shuffles on his feet for a bit before he finally meets Jungkook’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel dismissed.”

“It’s fine. I overreacted, I’m sor—”

“You didn’t. Don’t apologize. Instead just say that I’m forgiven if you mean it, so that we can move on and get washed.”

“You’re forgiven, prick,” Jungkook says and playfully rolls his eyes. Taehyung doesn’t move, and neither does Jungkook, so it’s a little awkward as they stand there and silently peer at each other. “You’re gonna continue escorting me to the hot springs or what?” Jungkook eventually says with an arch of his brow.

Taehyung chastises the sass with a zap but he reduces the distance nonetheless. His hand finds its way where it’s supposed to be — on Jungkook’s lower back —, and Jungkook tucks himself against the dragonborn with a smile.

“Where can we get changed?”

“There’s a cabin,” Taehyung says and Jungkook emits a surprised *‘Oh’*. “With a maid, hot towels, caviar appetizers and diamond chandeliers. There’s even—”

Jungkook smacks Taehyung’s chest. “Stop it,” he exclaims and Taehyung laughs. “I’m asking because there’s a lot of people,” he says as they approach the steaming expense of water.

“We’re in the middle of the forest, Viper. Where do you think you can get changed?”

Taehyung walks near a pile of towels to pluck a handful of them. Taehyung nods to the side and Jungkook trails after him, the two of them finding a more secluded area amidst lush bushes and trees.

“Better?” Taehyung asks and pulls up his shirt with one hand, tossing the garment on the ground.

“It’s missing a chandelier or two, but it’ll suffice for now.” Jungkook preens when Taehyung chuckles.

Taehyung has been smiling and laughing so much more around Jungkook lately, as if what barrier preventing him from letting go has finally been taken down.

It has, Jungkook realizes as he thinks back on what Taehyung had said to Areum.

Jungkook begins to undress as well but he’s a tad distracted by the display of skin and the faint scars peppering Taehyung’s body that Jungkook can’t help but find pretty; but also by the way Taehyung’s fingers fiddle with the buckle and zipper of his pants, the veins in his forearm shifting whenever he twists his hands this and that way.

“Whenever you’re done staring, you can undress too.”

Jungkook startles as if hit by a lightning bolt and he may as well have been when Taehyung’s gaze drifts on him. “Shut up…” Jungkook mutters and turns around. He removes the remainder of his clothing, keeping his necklaces, bracelets and earrings on. His hands halt at his underwear. He peers at Taehyung again who’s adjusting a short towel around his waist. “Are you naked?”

Taehyung, in his usual obnoxious self, unfastens the knot of the towel to open the side of it and give Jungkook a full view of a naked thigh, naked hip *and* the curve of an equally naked butt cheek.

“Taehyung!”

Taehyung barks out a laugh, ducking to dodge the balled up shirt Jungkook throws at him. “Treat it like what it is: a hot spring,” he says and ties back the towel. “But you can keep your underwear on if it makes you more comfortable.”

Jungkook does not because it'd be a little odd. So a minute later, a towel wrapped around his hips, and after neatly folding his and Taehyung's clothes into a pile that he leaves at the foot of a tree, Jungkook says "I'm ready."

Taehyung looks behind his shoulder. His gaze drags down Jungkook's form before it moves back up in a trail that leaves Jungkook a little warm. "Come on," he says and waits for Jungkook to reach his side before walking.

Jungkook hopes that his lack of subtlety isn't too blatant and, really, he blames his nosy eyes for the amount of times he glances at Taehyung.

Jungkook *can't* not look, which is entirely Taehyung's fault for, 1) being practically naked, 2) being so attractive, 3) freely granting Jungkook such a nice show of skin.

Jungkook is *enthralled* .

Taehyung is a well built man — although Jungkook's muscles are much sharper —, but Taehyung is particularly toned at the pecs and navel, arms strong and biceps sturdy from where Jungkook is holding onto one. It reminds Jungkook of when he had cleaned the blood off Taehyung after the fight with the Council, how soothing and pleasant it had been to run his hands along Taehyung's chest.

The air is cold around Jungkook but it warms up when he and Taehyung halt at the edge of the hot spring that is already occupied with the hunters — men and women mixed —, minus the kids that are bathing at the other hot spring 15 minutes away.

Taehyung promptly steps into the water, sitting down on what appears to be some kind of underwater bench that was formed in the rocky side of the pool. He dives his head in the water, wetting his throat and nape and splashing some more on his face that he wipes seconds later. Taehyung slicks his hair atop his head next.

Jungkook observes how some of the drops trickle down Taehyung's throat and collarbones. Clear of throats tear him out of his reverie and he jerks his gaze away from his distracting husband. He dips his toes in the water and gasps. "It's so warm."

"Hot springs tend to be warm, yes," Taehyung quips.

"You're annoying." The heated water bathes Jungkook's legs, then his chest and up to his neck when he sinks lower into the water and sits down next to Taehyung. Jungkook watches how some of the dragonborns splash each other in a way that would put to shame the kids that Jungkook is certain are also playing together. "This feels so nice… We should have a hot spring at our house."

"We've got a bathtub."

"I want a hot spring."

"Then build it."

"Build it for me."

Taehyung huffs. He spreads his arms along the edge of the pool, tilting his head back with a sigh as his lids fall shut.

“Are your scars alright?” Jungkook asks in a lowered voice when he catches Taehyung rolling his shoulders.

“Yeah. Just sore muscles,” Taehyung yawns.

“Have you been sleeping well lately? You seem tired.”

Taehyung’s eyes open to peer at Jungkook. “It could be better, but I get some sleep and it's all that matters. Plus Minsoo will make me some new tea infusions.”

“Hopefully it’ll help more.” Jungkook huddles closer to Taehyung, only satisfied when he’s nestled under Taehyung’s shoulder and against his side, the skin on skin contact shushing the beast. He slouches on the bench until his head can comfortably rest atop Taehyung’s arm behind him and he exhales a drawn out, happy sigh.

Time elapses, perhaps an hour or so that Jungkook spends discussing with the dragonborns that occasionally approach him.

Jungkook’s gaze drifts on Minjae and Rowoon at some point.

The two men are whispering in each other’s ear, exchanging kisses and pecks here and there, or a loving caress and nudge of the forehead. At some point Rowoon munches on some leftover meat while he chats and the way Minjae peers at his partner is palpable, his gaze softened with so much love and adoration that it translates into another kiss seconds later.

Jungkook understands now why very few would believe his and Taehyung’s pretense.

Something wrenches inside him, a little uncomfortable, a lot envious.

Jungkook imagines sharing this kind of affection with someone, or simply being looked at the same way Minjae does with Rowoon. He had fleetingly wanted this at some point, but had rapidly discarded it when he had realized he would be destined to marry a man he did not know.

That does not mean the yearn isn’t rekindled in the face of what he’d want but can’t have.

Taehyung’s shoulder shakes underneath Jungkook’s head, effectively detracting Jungkook.

Jungkook tilts his head backward and to the side.

Taehyung’s talking with some people, his eyes closed around a laugh. He has a mole under his lid, another at the tip of his nose, one more on the cheek but also on the lower lip. *So beautiful,* Jungkook muses, the moonlight casting a bluish tone on Taehyung’s skin and shiny hair.

Taehyung moves to grab a cup someone hands to him. When he does, his thigh brushes against Jungkook’s, and Jungkook is suddenly made acutely aware of how close he and Taehyung are.

They *are* naked, saved for their respective towel encircling their hips.

Feeling coy at the belated realization, Jungkook crosses his legs and folds his arm over his lap. It’s also a deterrent for his urge to reach out for Taehyung and touch the skin that is so bare and *right there.*

“What a day.”

Jungkook slowly peers at Woobin who installs himself at the curve of the hot spring, a few feet away from Jungkook. Woobin is in the same undressed state as everyone else in the pool, and Jungkook notes how Woobin is broader than Taehyung in the shoulders. Woobin is handsome, that much is undeniable, however Taehyung is a lot more attractive, an adjective Jungkook has never used for anyone in the past.

Jungkook had asked Jimin one day how he views the word, and Jimin had answered that in his case, seeing someone as attractive is realizing that there's a pull: emotional, physical, romantic and/or sexual.

Jungkook has felt it toward Taehyung, however only for the first two aspects. Jungkook has never been given the chance to explore his sexuality aside from the acceptance of it, and so he's never really felt any romantic, let alone sexual attraction for anyone.

All that Jungkook knows is that a pull exists between him and Taehyung in the form of a rubber band that strains and only relaxes when he's near the dragonborn, or when they share something, even from afar, like a glance or smile. Jungkook supposes that it only makes sense for the pull to whir awake when so much of their skins touches.

The greed whines for more. Fortunately, the warm water mollifies Jungkook to a state where he does not feel the need to ask. He simply takes.

His hand drifts in the water to rest on Taehyung's leg. Jungkook stills for a few seconds, waiting for any sign of discomfort, and when none occur, he strokes his thumb on the thigh, enjoying the sensation of the soft skin. Taehyung does not react to the caress not born from the pretense, but that is instead something selfish, kept hushed by the water, ambient steam and darkness of the night.

"Did you enjoy the hunt?" Woobin asks.

Ah.

Jungkook had already forgotten about Woobin, his mind a little foggy. "It was fun. I got to fly on Taehyung's back."

"You can fly on mine next time," Woobin offers. "I could show you some fun tricks."

"Like making me fall to my death?"

"Hey, come on now," Woobin says with a pout. "I apologized for it. I wouldn't ever dare to damage a beauty like yours."

Jungkook shakes his head but he smiles at the compliment.

"Will you be joining more hunts?"

"If Taehyung invites me, yes," Jungkook says, and Taehyung appears too absorbed in his own debate about God knows what to notice the discussion happening between Jungkook and Woobin.

"You don't need his permission to join a hunting squadron," Woobin comments with a roll of his eyes. "I've got my own too, if you ever want to be part of mine one day. All you'd gotta do is ask."

"When would you go hunting?"

“Whenever you’d want to join.”

Jungkook puffs out a chuckle. “Aren’t you accommodating.”

“Always for those who deserve it,” Woobin says with a smile and he’s not even discreet when he appraises Jungkook with a slow draw of his gaze.

“Well, I do believe I deserve what’s best out there, yes.”

“A pity that you don’t seem to attract what you want.” Woobin peers somewhere next to Jungkook.

Jungkook opens his mouth to respond, however someone precedes him.

“Because I allowed you to join the hunt does not mean that you have free reign in my land or in making advances to Jungkook.” Taehyung's timber is glacial, a stark contrast to the warmth surrounding the area. His face is set into a deceptive indifference, but the muscles of the jaws shifting underneath the skin, the dark eye he levels Woobin with give away his worsening ire.

Is Taehyung's temper flaring because of Woobin? Or because of something else?

“I’m simply talking to Jungkook, what's wrong with that?” Woobin says with faux innocence. “Keeping him all to yourself isn’t very healthy, you know.”

“Drop it,” Taehyung rasps and his voice somehow manages to sharpen even more.

Jungkook would object that regardless of how healthy or unhealthy it is, he wouldn’t mind being kept away by Taehyung for days.

Woobin groans. He creates some ice shards in his palm that he drops in his drink. “As boring as ever,” he says and twirls his metal cup, the ice clinking inside. “Haneul has been whining to me about how heartbroken he is.”

Jungkook bites back a retort.

“I don’t care,” Taehyung dismisses.

“He does,” Woobin rebuts and this time Jungkook scoffs. “What is it, dear prince?” He glides closer to Jungkook, an arm on the edge of the pool. “Your political arrangement isn’t fooling anyone.”

“You do realize that *Jimin* is the only reason why you’re even allowed to keep a single foot in Vanae, right?” Taehyung starts as he turns and leans forward.

Jungkook is partially caged by Taehyung now, half by the arm behind him, half by Taehyung's chest, and all he can see is Taehyung’s profile: the curves of his nose that furls up around a glower, the hair that curls behind the ear and on his neck, the muscles that tense as Taehyung speaks, as though straining against the urge to further move.

“He’s why you’re remotely safe from Seungwon,” Taehyung continues. “You owe him, and you owe *me.* The second you ruffle my wings too much, I’ll reinstate your ban from Vanae regardless of what Jimin may say. It begs the question of where you’ll be running away then, doesn’t it?”

Woobin's eyes shift to an icy blue, the pupil a thin slit at the center. "Don't fucking mention my father's name."

"Don't play games you can't afford to lose," Taehyung says, his voice louder and carrying across the silent hot spring.

The other dragonborns in the pool all exchange looks together, a certain cautiousness floating over them, more particularly to where Jaewook and Donghee are.

"Don't flirt with my husband. Don't put your hands on him. Don't fucking scent him," Taehyung adds with a palpable venom. "Don't try anything with Jungkook at all, and we won't have any problem."

"Come on. I wasn't flirting with him," Woobin says, whose wounded pride may be the reason why he continues to respond in the first place. "If I was, you wouldn't be here."

"I'm not playing around, Woobin."

Taehyung really isn't, Jungkook understands with shock, where Taehyung's declaration is punctuated by a staccato, and Jungkook wonders if Taehyung's ire has found its root in Jungkook's discomfort, or it is perhaps induced by something more personal, something more selfish.

Other people must have heard the rumble and know its significance because they intervene.

"Let it go, Woobin."

"Yeah, you should leave."

"But I'd like to hear Jungkook's answer," Woobin deflects. "My hunting squadron and I will—"

"*Woobin!*"

Woobin freezes on his spot. He swivels around toward the source of the voice.

Jimin, dressed in a similar fashion as everyone else, strides toward his brother in rapid steps.

"Shit," Woobin curses and begins to swim to the other side of where Jimin is approaching. Before he gets to run away any farther than a foot, Jimin snatches him by the arm and yanks him up.

"What the fuck did I tell you, you little shit," Jimin seethes and pulls Woobin out of the hot spring. "I fucking warned you."

"Listen, I was jok—"

"First, you'll be doing the dishes for a month."

"But—"

"Three months." Jimin coils an arm around Woobin's neck to trap him in a headlock, Woobin half bent forward from their height difference. "Second, you'll iron our clothes for a month too and that's only the beginning, let me tell you that much. I told you to not piss off Taehyung and to stay in your damn…"

Jungkook peers at the two disappearing figures. “That solves the issue,” he chuckles to himself and turns his head to watch Taehyung. “Do you—”

Jungkook isn’t given any kind of warning when a pair of lips captures his own.

He doesn’t show his surprise because it’d be odd and raise questions, but most importantly because he’s too preoccupied with melting into the unexpected kiss as his lids fall shut.

Taehyung breaks it moments later, however not for long. His hand cups the underside of Jungkook’s chin to tilt his head backward and his lips meet Jungkook’s again in an open mouthed kiss. Their noses bump together, their breaths mingle for a second before their mouths close around one another and Jungkook emits a sigh that sounds a little too pleased to his own ears. It doesn’t help that Taehyung’s hand travels to Jungkook’s nape, the hold securing and grounding when Jungkook feels as though he may be submerged by the warm water and kisses.

Jungkook’s hands sprawl on Taehyung’s chest to anchor himself, his palms drifting up the shoulder moments to the nape where they untangle in the hair.

Taehyung’s teeth graze Jungkook’s lower lip. Jungkook’s mouth parts around a surprised sigh and Taehyung uses this opportunity to deepen the kiss, his lips soft and the slightest bit wet and so, *so good* . There’s a hint of blueberry in it, one Jungkook’s tongue can *taste* Taehyung and the knowledge is as jarring as it is alluring, the heat of the hot spring tamed compared to the one that pools within Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn’t think the kiss lasts for very long. Taehyung wouldn’t let that happen, even for the pretense. However it contradictorily feels as though both a second and an hour has passed when Taehyung’s lips drift away from Jungkook’s.

Jungkook has to swallow a noise of protest then of contentment when Taehyung gently pulls the hair on Jungkook’s nape to command his attention in a tingle. Jungkook's lids flutter open, his gaze meeting Taehyung’s.

“I’ll help prepare tonight’s dinner,” Taehyung says, his breath warm on Jungkook’s lips. “Don’t venture too far alone, hm?”

“Yes,” Jungkook whispers, the word a little raspy.

He blames it on the selfish greed when he leans forward to steal another kiss as his hands slide down Taehyung’s bare chest to halt at the hip, cupping the waist there and *God.* It's debilitating how Jungkook craves to feel Taehyung’s skin on his own, how he wants nothing more than to sit on Taehyung’s lap and stay there for hours on end until he’s forgotten where his and Taehyung’s bodies begin and end.

Taehyung is the one to lean back again, a thumb and index holding Jungkook’s chin. Taehyung looks at Jaewook and Donghee, more of a warning stare rather than a haphazard glance. Taehyung rises to his feet and it’s only when he pivots that he looks away from Jaewook and Donghee and lets go of Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn’t bother with any sort of subtlety as he watches Taehyung step out of the pool, the droplets of water dribbling down his shoulders, back and legs. The towels around Taehyung’s hip is drenched and so it perfectly hugs the shape of Taehyung’s rear and—

Jungkook's head darts away from the dragonborn.

He peers at Jaewook and Donghee whose faces are etched into an alarmed look.

Jungkook smiles at them.

He settles back against the wall of the pool and he sinks down on the makeshift bench until his face is submerged by the water up to his mouth. His lips tingle from the remnant of the kiss. He passes his fingers over them, wondering if he can perhaps steal another peck tonight.

"…supposed to do?"

Jungkook stills on the branch he's perched on.

He had left the hot springs a quarter of an hour ago and he had gotten distracted by a curious creature in the trees on his way back, one that he had remembered hearing Taehyung speak of in the past. So Jungkook had climbed up the tree trunk and sat down on one of the thick branches to observe the tiny, blue and emerald colored creature.

"You can start by being more openly affectionate with him," Jimin says to Taehyung.

The two dragonborns walk past the tree Jungkook is in. Taehyung looks too lost in thought to notice Jungkook's presence. Jimin, on the other hand, immediately tilts his head up toward Jungkook. Jungkook is about to call out for them both, however Jimin's lips curve around a wolfish smile as he lifts an index to his mouth in a shushing motion.

So Jungkook remains quiet.

"Let's sit down for a bit," Jimin says and nods toward a tree stump far enough for Taehyung to remain unaware of Jungkook's presence, however close enough for Jungkook to listen in on the conversation. "As I was saying," Jimin carries and plops down, "be more publicly affectionate with him."

"I'm not having my ways with him in front of everyone just to prove a useless point."

Jungkook flushes at the image Taehyung paints in Jungkook's mind.

"You haven't even scented him before coming here. You can't blame them for being curious and a little perplexed."

"I can, actually, and I will. It's no one's business where Jungkook and I's relationship stands."

"But it matters when it could jeopardize Vanae and Amaris' union."

"I know."

"You should scent him, at the very least. It'll appease most, if not all of the lingering distrust."

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Kiss him.”

Jungkook gawks at Jimin.

“I did.”

“ *What?* ” Jimin exclaims.

“At the hot spring, after you left. I thought it’d send a message to Jaewook and Donghee and shut down any rumors, among other things."

“Other things like?” Jimin asks and when Taehyung remains quiet, he presses a little more. “Is this about Woobin?”

“What do you think? Your brother’s fucking unbearable like the other guys I saw checking Jungkook out. Do they think I’m blind or something? Just because I don’t say anything doesn’t mean that I don’t see.”

Jimin snickers. He discreetly glances at Jungkook with a wiggle of his brows. “Were you actually pissed that Woobin was flirting with Jungkook?"

“Of course? Why would Woobin, Jaewook or anyone else make any kind of advances to the Viper? Jungkook’s married to me,” Taehyung grumbles then clicks his tongue, his frown visible from where Jungkook is. “He’s my husband.”

“Maybe you should start treating him as such when other people are present."

Taehyung dismissively waves and leans back on a hand. “I should have known this would happen.”

“You should have. You don’t realize how lucky you are to have someone like Jungkook by your side. The other guys do, though,” Jimin notes. “You haven’t shown any of the, you know, mate-like behavior.”

“Because Jungkook and I aren’t mates."

Jungkook shoves down the pang of hurt that flares in him at the curt rejection.

“We’re… friends, I guess.”

“Still.”

“I know.” Taehyung falls quiet for a moment before speaking again. “Should I scent him?”

Jungkook perks up at the question, his slouching spine straightening up.

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I think I’m irritated and that I should scent him,” Taehyung concludes and Jungkook lifts a hand to his mouth to hide his smile even if no one can see it. “But if I do it now it’ll be obvious as to why I did it, no?”

“You can scent him later tonight when everyone’s asleep. Either way nothing is stopping you, and certainly not Jungkook,” Jimin quips, *the traitor*.

Jungkook glares at the back of Jimin’s head.

“What does that even mean?”

“Who knows,” Jimin shrugs.

Taehyung groans and slumps forward. “By the Elders… I didn’t sign up for all this nonsense when I accepted this wedding. I wanted to snap Woobin’s neck. You know that, right?”

“He’s an ass, ignore him. He’s all talk but no bark, and I scolded him. He’ll leave you and Jungkook alone.”

“I wouldn’t actually ban him from Vanae again, though,” Taehyung says and peers at Jimin. “I hate Woobin but I wouldn’t throw him into Seungwon's hands.”

“I know, Taehyung,” Jimin says and pats Taehyung’s knee. “Say, would it have annoyed you if someone other than Woobin had been too adventurous with Jungkook?”

“Yes? Wouldn’t have changed anything,” Taehyung says with obvious disdain. “It was just extra irritating with your rat of a brother.”

Jungkook promises to himself to give Jimin anything he wants for asking all the questions Jungkook had wondered but had not dared to say out loud. Jungkook is swarmed with a wave of thrill.

Perhaps Taehyung’s ire *had* been born from a place of selfishness after all.

“By the Elders…” Jimin breathes out.

“What?”.

“Were you jealous?”

Jungkook’s gaze snaps on Taehyung.

“ *Huh?* No.”

“Oh you were!”

“No!”

“Oh Elders, I can’t believe this.” Jimin dissolves into a hyena-like cackle.

“I was not! That’s not what jealousy is about. Why would I be jealous? Jungkook isn’t mine, I’m certainly not his, and we’re not dating. I’m single. He’s single. We’re just married. Arranged, mind you. Can you shut up already?” Taehyung grumbles when Jimin’s laughter endlessly rings through the forest.

Jungkook has to muffle his own against his arm.

“Jungkook *is* my husband regardless of the fact that we’re both single. Anyone would be annoyed if the person they married is being flirted with right in front of their eyes. That doesn’t make me jealous.”

“No wonder Jungkook had this awestruck, sultry look on his face,” Jimin says.

Nevermind Jungkook's earlier promise.

“Sultry?" Taehyung says with an appalled moue. "And he did not? And, hypothetically speaking, *if* I had been jealous, why would the Viper be happy about it?”

“I think it’s safe to say that Jungkook very much enjoys the idea of you being, ah, a little selfish with him.”

“Selfish?”

“Possessive, dumbass,” Jimin clarifies. “It can be reassuring. I think Jungkook experiences that with you, if the fit he threw with Haneul isn’t enough of a hint.”

Embarrassment washes over Jungkook's form, and a new vow forms in mind: ending his and Jimin's friendship.

Having heard enough, and not wishing to eavesdrop any further, Jungkook stealthily climbs down the tree to make his way back to the camp.

Jungkook may have a full belly after devouring the heavenly dinner, however it does not do much against the freezing winter cold.

Jungkook has been given a cloak earlier, his coat gone and lost during the flight, but it’s thin and tattered, not sufficient to keep him warm even from where he’s settled near the campfire.

The night has well advanced by now. Some of the kids have turned into their dragon form and huddled together into a pile of hatchlings, while the adults are conversing together in hushed voices.

Jungkook lifts his hands to his face. He blows on them and rubs them together to try and create more warmth.

His cloak is suddenly lifted off of him. Before he can snip at the person who took it away, a heavier, much warmer garment is thrown over his form.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Taehyung laughs behind Jungkook then walks toward Insung on the other side of the bonfire.

“Nah, I’m right,” Insung says. “I know my physics.”

Taehyung tosses the flimsy coat on the ground. “You barely know how to tie your shoelaces.”

“Show some damn respect to your elders.”

“I will when you’ll win one of the domains,” Taehyung says and sits down near Insung, his fingers curled around the top of his cup. He's not wearing his winter cloak, Jungkook notices.

Jungkook peers at his sides.

He immediately recognizes the gray fur and the black one of the thick collar.

Jungkook tunes out all and every conversation.

The inside of the cloak is impossibly cozy, Taehyung's lingering heat tightly enveloping Jungkook and it’s ridiculous how it reminds him of the dragonborn's hugs, of how warm and secure they always are.

Jungkook curls in on himself. He tugs on the lapels of the garment to properly close it around himself, its heaviness comforting. Then he pulls it higher up his face and he inhales. A whiff of something smoky and a bit musky suffuses his senses, so characteristically Taehyung. Jungkook smiles and buries his nose in the cloak.

“No fucking way.”

Jungkook startles awake at Jimin’s voice. His bleary eyes drift across the mostly empty camp, the scattered bonfires all put out except for the one Jungkook is settled in front of.

Jungkook surveys Jimin who settles next to him on the ground, mind still fuzzy from his impromptu nap. “Hm?”

“You know how much Taehyung loves that one armchair, right? How stupidly territorial he is of it,” Jimin says and Jungkook confusedly nods. “It's *nothing* compared to how much more he loves this cloak, and everyone's aware of that.”

“What 'bout it?”

“Dragonborns value and respect each other's possessions, territories and things like those. No one would dare touch Taehyung’s cloak, for example, because it would leave their scent on it.”

For some reason, Jungkook flushes at the newfound knowledge. “He’s just being nice. I was cold.”

“Taehyung? Being nice? *Taehyung?* ”

Jungkook snorts. “You know he is in his own way.”

“Yes, but not this kind of nice.”

Jungkook notices then the many glances thrown his away by the few dragonborns still awake and loitering around. “Why is everyone looking at me?”

“As I said, Taehyung is not this nice," Jimin says and scoots closer to Jungkook. “If he only cared about warming you up, he would have given you another winter coat, not his own.”

Jungkook draws his legs up and encircles them with his arms. “I’m confused,” he says and drops his chin on his knees, his eyes closing.

“Look at Jaewook and Donghee."

Jungkook reluctantly peels an eye open. He searches for the two men and when he finds them, Jaewook and Donghee dutifully avoid Jungkook’s gaze. “They’re skittish because Taehyung kissed me and indirectly threatened them.”

“Partially, yes, but mostly because of the cloak."

"How so?"

"In dragonborn language, it’s a statement, Jungkook. A loud one. It’s not…staking claim, per se, but it’s saying *‘I’ve given one of my most prized possessions to Jungkook. It is mine, but it is also now Jungkook’s, meaning that I view Jungkook as someone who belongs with me, with my family, and who is worthy of owning what I own’* ,” Jimin explains. “It’s also saying that you’re taken and that they should back off once and for all.”

“That’s—” Jungkook timidly surveys Taehyung when his laugh elevates in the camp. He averts his eyes seconds later and entirely covers himself and his head with the cloak. “That's saying too much, Jimin, and it sounds *a lot* like staking claim.”

Jimin barks out a laugh. “If a dragonborn wants to stake claim of someone, I can assure you that said someone would know right away, and everyone else would be an unfortunate witness of it. Dragonborns are immature and shameless when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“What does staking claim involve anyway?”

“A bunch of gestures: visible marks like bites or hickeys, wearing your mate’s clothes or anything your mate bought or made for you.”

Jimin hums to himself, unaware of the spiral he sends Jungkook into because Jungkook has worn Taehyung’s shirts and sweaters before and is now wrapped in Taehyung’s *prized cloak*.

“Lots of public displays of affection and so on," Jimin continues. "Oh, and scenting. Scenting is a huge deal. Ah and there’s also the whole providing aspect? Providing help, food, and whatnot. For example, it can be seen as rude to feed someone’s mate. Some mates want to prepare each other’s plate, you know? A bit like when Taehyung prepares your—”

“Jimin. Shut up.”

Jimin snickers. “Has he—” He pauses.

Jungkook feels a shoe nudge his leg. He pulls back the cloak to peep up at Taehyung, only the top of his head peeking out.

“Still cold?” Taehyung asks.

“Not anymore, thanks to you,” Jungkook says, horribly honest.

Jungkook stares at Taehyung.

Ah…

He’s so needy and clingy, even more so when he’s sleepy, and so he speaks.

“Taehyung,” Jungkook starts and waits for the dragonborn to verbally acknowledge him.

“What is it?”

“I’m sleepy."

“Let’s head to bed. I finished preparing our tent.”

“You weren’t talking?”

“Everyone went to sleep. Come on, it’s late.” Taehyung helps Jungkook rise to his feet, steadying him when Jungkook staggers a bit. “Goodnight,” he says to someone who responds with a chuckle.

“I want to brush my teeth and wash my face first,” Jungkook demands and hugs Taehyung’s arm to his chest, his hands sliding under the sleeve to feel the skin.

Taehyung emits a long, drawn out sigh that Jungkook purses his lips at. “Let’s, then.”

“How come you let me wear your cloak?” Jungkook asks a minute later as he and Taehyung make their way through the forest. .

“Because I’m nice like that.”

“No you’re not.”

“Should I take it back?”

“I want to know.”

“There’s nothing to know. I noticed you were cold, so I lent it to you.”

“Jimin said you gave me your cloak for another reason. Is it true?”

Taehyung sobers up, his face adopting an unreadable look. “You were cold. I lent the cloak.”

“And?” Jungkook waits for a response that does not arrive, so, feeling playful, and emboldened by his sleepiness, he adds “Jimin also said you giving me the cloak wasn’t necessarily like staking claim, but that it kinda was.”

“No, what the hell."

“Then why else? I know it wasn’t only to keep me warm.”

Taehyung exhales through his nose. “It kept any annoying guy off of you. Like Woobin, mainly.”

“How would a simple cloak achieve this?” Jungkook wonders even if he already knows the answer, but he’d like to hear it from Taehyung’s mouth this time.

They arrive at some kind of ‘sink’ that has been built with stones on the ground, the contraption the height of a bathtub. Some bamboo stems dangle above it, linked up to a tree then disappearing in it, most likely connected to a nearby river.

Jungkook removes the wooden ‘cap’ shutting the bamboo stem and water flows, however freezing when he dips his hand under it. “Can you warm the water? It’s too cold.”

“Do I look like your personal heater?” Taehyung quips but walks closer and crouches in front of the 'tub' that slowly fills up with water. He pulls his sleeve up his forearm and dives a hand in the rocky basin.

Jungkook sits on the edge of the tub, testing its sturdiness before properly resting his weight on it.

“Because it’s mine.”

Jungkook peers down at Taehyung who’s staring at the water. “What?”

“Your question.”

“Oh. So you gave *me* your cloak. *I* am the one wearing this legendary garment that has never been allowed to be touched by anyone else,” Jungkook says, his smile growing the more he speaks, “and because of this, everyone backed away.”

“Something like that,” Taehyung mumbles.

“It sounds a lot like staking claim, if you ask me.”

“Good thing I didn’t ask.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

Taehyung props an elbow on his knee and sits his chin in his hand, doing nothing to hide the tug at the corner of his lips.

“Is there a third reason why you gave it to me?”

Taehyung doesn’t reply, and this is all the answer Jungkook needs.

“Ehh, there is. Which one?”

“You’re obnoxious.”

“Are there more than three? Maybe four? Five?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’d like to know,” Jungkook answers.

Taehyung ducks his head, tilted away from Jungkook and supported against the back of his hand. “It annoyed me. Woobin and the others,” Taehyung eventually admits.

Jungkook's hope soars, but it wanes at Taehyung's next addition.

“They were being disrespectful.”

Was this truly the only driving force behind Taehyung's ire? Being disrespected? Something so egoistical?

"Say," Jungkook begins, and he carries on before he can cower into a wounded silence. "I remember you mentioning to me once that we're free to do what we want with our lives, including romantically. We're in an arranged marriage, after all. So you wouldn't mind if I were to go on a date with someone else, right?"

Taehyung's eyes that had been evasive dart on Jungkook.

Neither of them look away, their gazes locked together.

"Someone asked you on a date?"

"Woobin kinda did."

The apparent nonchalance and aloofness that veils Taehyung's form does not detract Jungkook from the way Taehyung's shoulders tense. "Did you agree?"

"Would you mind if I had?"

"I asked a question."

"I did too."

"Answer mine and I'll answer yours."

Jungkook levels Taehyung's with an unimpressed look. Taehyung arches a brow in response.

"I didn't. I haven't talked to him again after he left the hot springs with Jimin." Jungkook folds his arms over his lap. "Would you have minded if I had," he says but it sounds more like an accusation, temper coating his voice.

"Yes."

"Because it'd be disrespectful to you?"

"Partially."

Jungkook hums a chuckle and it sounds disdainful to his own ears. Hurt. He looks to the side, his fingers balling up into fists that he relaxes a split second later. Hopefully the dragonborn hasn't noticed the flash of disappointment that has flared within Jungkook, or the upset that is slowly but surely smothering him.

"You're upset."

Fuck.

"Why?"

"Because I thought—" Jungkook shakes his head. "It doesn't ma—"

"It does," Taehyung cuts off. "Why are you upset?"

Jungkook exhales.

Being vulnerable is scary. He does not like it. However it's a little better with Taehyung, and so Jungkook manages to speak. "Because I'm disappointed that disrespect is the reason why me going on a date with someone else would bother you."

"Why does it disappoint you?" Taehyung asks, his query softened around a sincere confusion.

"Because I was hoping the reason would be more…" Jungkook trails off, fiddling with his wedding band. "More selfish and less impersonal."

"Isn't it selfish?"

"I meant selfish toward me. Maybe selfish isn't the correct word," Jungkook backtracks, his voice becoming quieter by the second. "Greedy."

"Greedy?" Taehyung doesn't say anything for a while, most likely mulling over Jungkook's words, then he says "You want me to be greedy with you?"

Jungkook breathes out a sigh and his body slackens from where it had been straining and stiff. *Taehyung understood.* Jungkook didn't have to explain, and he nods, relieved.

"In what way?"

"In any way. Any way's good," Jungkook mumbles and readjusts the cloak around himself, feeling too exposed.

"How would you feel if I were to say that you potentially accepting Woobin's proposal annoyed me because— Because… 'Cause it… Uhm… It made me feel like you were giving him bread. Or that you would. Eventually. And I didn't like it," Taehyung says, his words clipped.

"Is it hypothetical or did you feel like this?"

Jungkook's sense of vulnerability is echoed by Taehyung in the way Taehyung cards a hand through his hair then flicks at his nails, his mouth set into a thin line.

"The latter," Taehyung confesses after a beat of silence. "You said the bread you want and that I give you involves a bunch of different things."

"Me going on a date with someone counts as a loaf to you?"

"I guess? No. I don't know. You go on dates with Jimin, Hoseok or Seokjin, and it doesn't annoy me because they give you biscuits, yes?"

"Yes, but you'd be annoyed if I went out with Woobin or Jaewook," Jungkook says and he really, *really* hopes that the smile that stretches his lips isn't too audible in his voice.

Taehyung hums, a sound that Jungkook reads as one of confirmation.

Jungkook lifts the collar of the cloak to conceal the happiness that swarms him. "Do you know why?"

“Because he was fucking flirting with you? That’s just… Annoying. And I mean, we’re— We’re single but we’re friends, right?” Taehyung timidly glances somewhere near Jungkook, as though requesting some kind of reassurance, yet still refusing to meet Jungkook's eyes.

“We’re friends, Taehyung,” Jungkook says, horribly endeared by the grumbling dragonborn.

“Right. Well.” Taehyung clears his throat. “The bread thing should only be between us. I think. ‘Cause it’s our thing, no? But what if you give some to Woobin if you go out with him? What if you realize that someone else can give you these loaves?”

“Then what?”

Taehyung drags his fingers through the water in lazy drags. “Then I’d be annoyed.” He peers up at Jungkook. “Is that greedy?”

“It is,” Jungkook says with a breathy chuckle and he leans forward to slide down on his knees next to Taehyung. He keeps the fluffy collar over his mouth to hopefully hide the flush that must be tinting his face. “It’s greedy.”

Taehyung’s eyes finally find Jungkook’s, his gaze searching. “Do you like it?”

“Yes…"

Taehyung smiles. “Yeah?”

Jungkook nods, because that’s all he can do, not trusting his voice.

Taehyung chuckles and the sound prompts Jungkook to avert his gaze. “You must have been a dragonborn in a previous life.”

“Why?”

“Because dragonborns are territorial by nature. This greed and selfishness you’ve been speaking of sounds like that sometimes."

“Like what?”

One of Taehyung's hands inches toward Jungkook. He grabs the collar that he pulls down and readjusts around Jungkook’s neck. “This cloak belongs to me,” he states while peering at the garment. “I don’t lend it to anyone. I don’t let anyone touch it or wear it. It’s mine, and everyone knows this.” His gaze flickers on Jungkook’s. “You make it sound like you want me to treat you in similar ways.”

Heat bursts in Jungkook’s face.

He aimlessly opens and closes his mouth, trying to formulate a response that would be appropriate, yet finding none.

“Dragonborns can be… I don’t like the term, it’s childish, but they can be possessive in their relationships, whether platonic or romantic, and—”

“I’m not possessive,” Jungkook promptly retorts.

Taehyung snorts. “Sure.”

“I’m not. You are.”

“No, I’m not,” Taehyung scoffs.

“Who has been whining at the idea of me taking bread from someone else? You.”

“Ah, want to play it like this?” Taehyung says with a curl at the corner of his mouth.

Jungkook doesn’t like how much more teasing Taehyung is growing to be — *he loves it* — but sometimes it's too much and threatens to throw Jungkook into an earlier demise out of pure embarrassment and delight.

"I'm not play—"

“Who's parading in my cloak, greedy for a plethora of fare like my affection, attention and curiosity, to quote him? Who frowns and sulks when it’s not given to him, or when it’s given to someone other than him, hm?”

“I— That’s not—” Jungkook prays to God that the ambient night around them conceals enough of his blazing cheeks and neck. “I don’t sulk. You’re the one who sulked with Woobin."

“My point still stands. I may struggle understanding people, but that doesn't mean I don’t look or listen. Kinda like when you blushed after I—”

“Anyway! For how long have you had this cloak?” Jungkook deflects then smacks Taehyung’s shoulder that shakes under a silent laugh.

“Over a decade. Minsoo made it and gave it to me. I’d still wear it even when it was too big on me back then.”

“It’s in really good condition.”

Taehyung rises from his crouched position, a hand in his pants’ pocket while his other one emerges from the water. “I take care of what’s mine.”

Technically speaking, Jungkook knows that Taehyung is referring to the cloak.

However, rationale escapes his treacherous mind. It prefers to relate Taehyung’s words with how Taehyung had served Jungkook his dinner earlier, how he had helped Jungkook climb up a hill when the group had gone on a brief stroll, or how he has heated the cold water for Jungkook.

“It’s warm enough,” Taehyung announces through a yawn. “Hurry, I’m tired.”

Jungkook also tries not to think about how Taehyung is taking care of him even now by waiting for Jungkook to brush his teeth and wash his face, or by allowing Jungkook to wear his cloak that Jungkook selfishly keeps on until he and Taehyung walk back to the camp.

The two of them crawl inside their tent that has been anchored at the outskirts of the area, sufficiently close to everyone else to be aware of anything that may be happening, but also far enough to give them a sense of privacy.

Jungkook is nestled under a heap of blankets, Taehyung is too on Jungkook's right, the interior of the tent filled in a darkness that Jungkook's eyes slowly adapt to. He can see the shape of Taehyung's body and face. He can also see how Taehyung has the blanket pushed down to his lap, meaning that his chest is easily accessible.

Jungkook turns to lay on his side, now facing Taehyung. He timidly slings an arm over Taehyung's navel and waits. Emboldened by the lack of protest, Jungkook plays with the hem of the top and internally pretends to act surprised when he 'accidentally' rides up the shirt.

Taehyung still says nothing, so Jungkook continues.

Jungkook sprawls his fingers on the skin of Taehyung's waist, his thumb drawing back and forth motions at the hip bone. A hand grabs his wrist moments later and Jungkook freezes.

Taehyung brings Jungkook's arm higher up his chest where he rests it. He then turns Jungkook's wrist so that the palm faces upward, and, in an ever so gentle motion, he presses their hand together, their fingers loosely intertwined.

"You said you were thinking of other things when Woobin touched you," Taehyung begins. He doesn't immediately expand on his thoughts. Instead, his digits drift above Jungkook's to halt at the ring finger adorned by the promise of their vows. "What are you thinking of right now?"

"That I'm really, really, really happy."

"Are you thinking about another person's hands?"

"Why would I think about someone else's touch when I have yours?"

A lull floats between them.

Jungkook bites down on his tongue when Taehyung wordlessly pushes on Jungkook's shoulders and turns him around, Jungkook now facing away from Taehyung.

"You talk too much," Taehyung mutters behind Jungkook.

Jungkook lets his chuckle run free this time. "Did you get shy?"

"I don't ever get shy."

"So if I turn around and light up the lantern, you won't have flushed cheeks or anything like that, correct?"

"Certainly. I don't blush, unlike you."

"Alright." Jungkook pushes himself on an elbow to reach toward the oil lantern. "Let me—" He squeaks when he's yanked back to his spot, held down by a hand fastened at the back of his pajama top.

"Stop it." Taehyung punctuates the demand with a pinch on Jungkook's side.

Jungkook laughs and amidst it, he curls his fingers around Taehyung's wrist to tug it further over his side, up until Taehyung's arm is properly draped over Jungkook's waist. "Bread?"

Taehyung complies. He encircles Jungkook's chest and secures his palm at the center to pull Jungkook closer to him in one swift motion, Jungkook's back soon pressed against Taehyung's chest.

Jungkook closes his eyes, ready to fall asleep now that he's cradled in Taehyung's arms.

"I've had a fulfilling life."

Jungkook's eyes blink open. "What?"

"Just— Don't interrupt."

"Sorry," Jungkook says, now wide awake with curiosity.

"I had a good life overall, if we ignore the whole kidnapping and torturing affair. Or the fact that some dragonborns fear me because I'm a chaos dragon. Or how the Council wants me locked up and dead," Taehyung lists. "But aside from that, I've had a loving family, friends and people. And I love exploring the world around me, discovering and learning new things, new knowledge or creatures. Everything. I've always been a curious kid, so all in all, I very rarely get bored."

Jungkook listens. He's utterly confused but he listens, basking in anything that Taehyung wants to share with him.

"I *always* have something to do, learn or find, right? Even now as an adult, I never get bored. Ever."

"Right…" Jungkook says when Taehyung falls quiet. "Where is this leading to?"

A puff of air tickles the back of Jungkook's nape.

Another instance of silence passes.

"You left a few days ago for Amaris and came back a few days later."

"I know?"

' *I was there?',* Jungkook does not say.

Taehyung mumbles some intelligible words. "This shouldn't be so difficult."

"What shouldn't be?"

"I talked to my mom when you left and she nagged at me for an hour about how I should express my feelings more and whatnot with you."

Jungkook wants to swivel around and hug Taehyung but he doesn't, not wanting to impede Taehyung's candor. "I'm listening. What was it about me being away?"

"I never get bored," Taehyung resumes, his voice hushed.

"And?"

"I was bored when you left."

Jungkook breathes out a quiet *'Oh'*.

"It's not as though I had nothing to do. The opposite. I had a bunch of work, some fun, some less fun. I was *busy*. But—" Taehyung pauses. "I was still bored."

Jungkook removes his hand from where it's clasped over Taehyung's forearm to press his fingers against his mouth as he stares ahead, wondering if he has fallen asleep into an unkind dream.

"At some point I had found an incredibly rare plant, especially during winter, so I got excited when I saw it. I plucked it out and turned around to show it to you but guess what? You obviously weren't there." Taehyung heaves a grunts, and Jungkook muffles his laughter in his palm. "So not only did I end up talking for a split second to a damn tree about this stupid flower, but a lady had stumbled on me and from the look on her face, she had seen everything. Was fucking humiliating."

Jungkook bursts into laughter, loud and carefree.

"It had happened, like, six or seven times in total. Seven times I caught myself about to call your name to show or tell you something. It was terrible."

"How many times were you seen?"

"Only once, thank the Elders," Taehyung says and Jungkook dissolves into another fit of laughter. "Don't laugh. It's not funny."

"What was the plant?"

"A nocteal. It's beautiful, you'd like it." Taehyung says this with an unwavering certainty and Jungkook's cheeks hurt from how much he's smiling, so delighted at how much Taehyung is growing to know him.

"You'll have to show it to me."

"Yeah, if I find another."

"So what's the conclusion of all this? Life is boring without me?"

"I wouldn't go *that* far. My life is great without you. But... Yeah. Something like that."

Jungkook indulges his yearns at the partial confession. He scoots backward a little more, reducing what sliver of distance that had been left between himself and Taehyung, not even a hair's breadth separating Taehyung's chest from Jungkook's spine. "Life is more fun with you in it," Jungkook whispers, the pulsation of his heart a little loud in his ears. "Would you be sad if I was gone for, like, a month?"

"Why would you be gone for a month?" Taehyung says after a yawn.

"I don't know? Maybe because I left to work at Amaris."

"That doesn't mean we wouldn't be able to see each other."

"Yes but imagine," Jungkook huffs. "Hypothetically."

"Hypothetically, I wouldn't be sad."

Jungkook pouts. He twists his head to peer at Taehyung, only able to see the vague shape of a head. “Why not?”

“You’d want me to be sad?”

“I’d want you to miss me,” Jungkook blurts out before he can’t stop himself.

“Being sad and missing someone aren’t inherently related.”

“Alright, emotionally capable man. Why don’t you teach me about the secrets to a happy life next?”

“Shut up you damn brat,” Taehyung says through a huffed chuckle.

“Would you miss me?”

“I’d be bored."

“Sounds like you’d miss me.” Jungkook daydreams about it being true as he cups the back of Taehyung’s hand. “I’d miss you.”

“Why?”

Jungkook takes a moment to ponder on his reply to the odd question. “Because I like having you around, being able to talk to you, be with you, or annoy you,” he says and snickers when Taehyung zaps him. “Why would you be bored?”

Taehyung appears to be mulling over his answer as well because he’s mute for a while, then he says “Because I’ve gotten used to you being around.”

Jungkook caves into his greed. He twists around to face Taehyung. “Can you lay on your back, please?”

Taehyung does without question, and Jungkook smiles.

Jungkook shuffles forward until he's pressed flush against Taehyung’s side. He wraps his arms around Taehyung's waist and it's only when his head is resting on Taehyung’s chest, right above the slowly beating heart, that Jungkook slackens and closes his eyes.

Jungkook never would have thought in a million years that he would meet someone able to make him feel as though everything will be alright in the end, no matter what hardships are thrown on their path, because he and Taehyung will handle everything together.

“Tae?”

“What?”

“I’m so happy…” Jungkook moves a bit higher up the bed to prop his head on the same pillow Taehyung occupies. “It’s so itchy in my chest, it feels so nice. I’m really happy you asked me to join you for the hunt.”

“Really? I wasn’t sure if you’d want to join, actually.”

“Of course I’d want to. You love hunting and you going out of your way to invite me is… It makes me feel included in your life," Jungkook says. "Are you happy that I’m here?”

“It’s been fun. They like you. Those in my hunting squadron already asked me if you’d join for more hunts, and I said I’d ask you.”

“I’d definitely love to participate again. I’m glad they like me, I like them too.”

“That's good. Sleep, now.”

Jungkook’s head drifts against the side of Taehyung’s nape, breathing in the scent of ember. “Thank you for letting me in.”

Taehyung readjusts their position a little, pulling the blanket over them and keeping an arm secured around Jungkook.

“Thank you for letting me in too.”

Jungkook hums a chuckle, nuzzling Taehyung’s nape as he falls asleep.

Jungkook wakes up alone in the tent, which isn’t all surprising, but it puts a moue on his lips.

He leaves the tent a minute later to take care of his business and brush his teeth. When he doesn’t see Taehyung anywhere, he walks toward the small handful of people sipping on coffee near the campfire.

“Have you seen Taehyung?”

“Saw him leave not long before you,” Insung says.

“I think he went back inside your tent,” Youngjae adds.

Worry sinks within Jungkook.

He swivels around and marches toward his and Taehyung’s tent and yanks its 'door' open.

The interior is faintly lightened by the outside sunrise and it’s enough for Jungkook to see the shape of a body laying on the makeshift bed.

“Where were you?” Jungkook says and crawls inside, zipping the tent flap shut.

“Went out to take a piss and brush my teeth. Thought I’d get up but it’s too damn early."

“Idiot,” Jungkook huffs and lays down next to Taehyung.

“Did anyone see you?”

“Insung and Youngjae. They were the only ones outside. Why?”

Taehyung moves next to him for a moment before stilling. “Viper, would you be fine with me scenting you?”

Jungkook’s lids fly open as his head twists to the right. “*Yes*,” he agrees with more enthusiasm than is acceptable. “More than fine. How—”

“Stay where you are.” Taehyung shuffles to face Jungkook.

It’s dim enough in the tent for Jungkook to see the bird’s nest that is Taehyung's hair and how bleary Taehyung’s half closed eyes are, still half asleep.

Jungkook should be concerned at how adorable he finds the dragonborn.

Taehyung scoots closer to Jungkook who lays on his back. Taehyung braces an arm next to Jungkook's head, the pillow dipping under its weight. He leans over Jungkook, their faces a few inches apart from each other.

Jungkook tentatively peers up at Taehyung who looks down at him. “Uhm… Do I have to do anything?”

“No,” Taehyung says, his timber hoarse with the remnant of his sleep.

Taehyung cups the side of Jungkook’s throat and shoulder with a hand, dragging it higher up until it cradles Jungkook’s nape, and the thumb finds its place at the back of Jungkook’s ear under the lobe. It kneads there once, but it's enough for Jungkook to melt in reaction, sinking into the blankets.

Taehyung crosses what distance is left between them. He tilts his head to the side and Jungkook thinks with a stuttering heart that the dragonborn may kiss him, however Taehyung’s face vanishes from Jungkook’s view.

Taehyung’s breath is warm when he dips his head in Jungkook’s neck. A pair of lips is next, their brush fleeting and accidental, however enough to elicit a tide of goosebumps on Jungkook’s skin.

Taehyung remains there for a few seconds but he doesn’t seem to be satisfied because he shifts some more, his chest soon half resting atop Jungkook’s as he lays his weight on him.

Jungkook gorges onto the granted proximity, on the small skin on skin contact, on the way he can feel the curves of Taehyung’s nose and mouth against his neck. His lids flutter and his mouth parts open to let his tongue flicker out and wet his lower lip, feeling parched. His hands sprawl on the width of Taehyung’s back, fingers gripping at the shirt to anchor himself when his mind is thawed from the warm thrill that thrums through his limbs.

Taehyung exhales through his nose that he nudges at the angle of Jungkook’s jaw, pressing a little harder moments later.

“Do you like my scent?” Jungkook murmurs, his voice refusing to work to its full extent. Taehyung makes a noise, however Jungkook can’t tell if it's one of confirmation or denial. “Are you falling asleep?”

“Mh.”

Taehyung begins to brush his face in the alcove of Jungkook’s neck in slow left and right motions, and Jungkook’s fond chuckle transforms into a sigh that he can’t be bothered to be embarrassed

about.

Jungkook closes his eyes, his other senses too distracting, and soon, they shrink down on all that Taehyung makes: his heavy weight above Jungkook, his warmth, the softness of his skin grazing Jungkook's when his nose drifts lower before crawling back up. There is also his scent, whose smokiness appears to have heightened, but Jungkook isn't too certain, his thoughts too muddled together.

Jungkook draws his legs up and eases his hands on the back of Taehyung's shirt. He strokes them along the spine, passing by the middle to halt at the strong shoulders that feel so relaxed beneath his palms.

Taehyung lodges his thumb below Jungkook's jaw, pushing at the bone and Jungkook obeys, tilting his head however Taehyung wants it. "This okay?" Taehyung wonders and his words are spoken right in the curse of Jungkook's throat, his lips settled there.

"Yes," Jungkook answers, a little too breathy, but Taehyung doesn't seem to care as he rubs his face lower again, closer to the collarbones.

Taehyung's lips part around a warm puff of air. His hair tickles Jungkook, the strands skimming his neck and chin. One of Jungkook's hand twitches on Taehyung's back when he feels the nose and mouth trail up the juncture of his throat and scenting this area once more.

Taehyung is *scenting* Jungkook, so unabashedly, so pleasantly.

"This feels good," Jungkook murmurs, his entire body tingling from the constant caresses.

Jungkook can barely feel the jagged and wrinkled scars underneath the fabric. He doesn't like it. It's too many layers separating him from Taehyung.

He does not think twice when he slides his hands underneath Taehyung's shirt to feel the heated smooth skin, then the ragged one. He alleviates his contact when he reaches the parallel scars, only the tip of his fingers grazing the two elongated gashes in feather-light touches.

Taehyung also appears to enjoy their closeness, and Jungkook smiles when he feels the tiny bumps of the shiver that trickles on Taehyung's back. "Does it feel nice? When someone touches your scars?"

Taehyung makes another sound that isn't much of a reply, however seconds later he says "Maybe? Don't know. No one touched them like this."

"Not even Jimin? Or your parents?"

"No one. Just people patting my back above my shirt, stuff like that… S'it."

Jungkook fully spreads his palms and fingers on the scars of where Taehyung's wings would be. He slides his hands down and pauses at the center to lightly scratch his nails there, shuddering when he imagines that it is being done to him. His palms drift to the jagged scars again. "Do you like it?" He asks once more as the pulp of his fingers trace the rough edges.

"It distracts me from the pain. They hurt less," Taehyung says then goes back to his task, his thumb drawing haphazard motion at the angle of the jaw he nuzzles. "My spine's breaking though."

Jungkook laughs and he removes his hand from beneath Taehyung's shirt to smooth the fabric down. "We can sit."

Taehyung doesn't need to be told twice as he pulls Jungkook up by the arm.

Jungkook finds himself sitting upward, a little dizzy from the sudden movement. Taehyung settles crossed on the blanket and rather than looking sleepy like he had before, he seems more focused yet contradictorily more out of it.

"C'mere," Taehyung says and tugs on Jungkook's wrist.

Jungkook achieves what he does best when asked such things from Taehyung: blatantly and purposefully misinterpret it. He straddles Taehyung, folding his legs under him to frame Taehyung's.

"Not what I meant," Taehyung fleetingly comments while Jungkook makes himself comfortable on the dragonborn's lap.

"You should have been clearer."

Jungkook doesn't really know what he's supposed to do, what more the scenting ritual entails, however he tilts his head to the right to facilitate Taehyung's task as his palms find their home around Taehyung's neck.

The hand Taehyung had trailed to the base of Jungkook's scalp tightens in the hair. The fingers curl into a grip that isn't painful at all, but it pulls on the strands, the prickling sensation oddly pleasant.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung and stills on his spot.

Taehyung's bang is haphazardly dangling over his gaze, faintly parted where his hair is pushed aside, yet the tousled strands do nothing to mitigate the piercing pair of eyes riveted on Jungkook.

It isn't what stuns Jungkook, however.

It's the faint sheen of gold in Taehyung's irises.

The warmth that had been delicately flowing through Jungkook gathers in his belly in something sharper now. The pulsations of his heart pick up, thudding so loud between his ears that he worries Taehyung may hear it.

A buzz of anticipation flickers within Jungkook at the alarm bell that rings in his head. He can't find the proper word to describe the rush that Taehyung's unwavering eyes elicit in him at first, however one comes to his mind eventually.

He feels *trapped.*

Delightfully, willingly so.

Ensnared by the very weight of Taehyung's gaze that pins him in place. By the hand on his lower back and the other one at the back of his head that holds him where and how Taehyung wants Jungkook to be.

And Jungkook lets it happen, allowing Taehyung to do as he pleases.

All at once, Jungkook is reminded that Taehyung *is* partially a dragon. That Taehyung has a part in him that is inhuman in the most literal sense of the word. It's a bit demented, how thrilled Jungkook is to witness the way Taehyung's more primal and untamed instincts flicker to life, enough to ignite Jungkook's fight of flight senses that clash with each other.

Not that Jungkook will run away, unafraid of the dragonborn, and too curious about him.

Taehyung is strong, Jungkook distractedly thinks from where he's become lax in Taehyung's hold. Even in his human form, Taehyung could very well snap someone's bones, snatch their last breath in the blink of an eye if he desired to.

It's a testimony of how mad Jungkook is that he revels in such knowledge as Taehyung's mouth is pressed against the vital point of his throat.

But then again, is it really that lunatic?

Jungkook's necromancy has been the only semblance of control he has known in his entire life, where he has grown up surrounded by death since he was a child. It only makes sense for him to find impossibly charming the way Taehyung's sheer power could very well relate to death, does it not?

"I think you like my scent," Jungkook whispers as a tease, and goosebumps trail up his spine, blooming from where his and Taehyung's skin touch and running down the palm cradling his lower back.

"Do I…" Taehyung hums against Jungkook's collarbone, spreading more of his scent there.

"I think so, Tae." This time, Jungkook is the one to pull on Taehyung's locks to prompt the dragonborn to recline.

Their gazes lock on each other.

When Jungkook lolls his head to the side, displaying part of his throat in a leisure, taunting, *daring* motion, his desire meets its due.

The glow of gold shimmers In Taehyung's eyes anew.

Jungkook internally smiles.

You really don't have a clue, do you?" Taehyung rasps and he looks so dazed yet entranced, his rapt attention entirely given to Jungkook.

"A clue about what?"

Jungkook wonders if the golden hue has really gotten more intense or if he is imagining it.

"What baring your neck to me like this means," Taehyung answers, and his usual reluctance to speak his feelings appears to have been hushed tonight.

Jungkook emits an amused sound. "And what does it mean?"

"The throat is a vital point." Taehyung lets his thumb drag a slow path down the column of Jungkook's throat and he lets it sit at the juncture of the shoulder and neck, the nail ever so slightly

sinking there. “Easy to find, easy to access, easy to wound. It’s a show of trust to expose it for someone, let alone allow it to be touched.” Taehyung angles Jungkook’s head to the left, his gaze lidded as he stares for a moment at the way the loose collar of Jungkook's shirt slides off his shoulder. He dips his face there, first the nose, then its bridge and the soft lips.

“What else?” Jungkook asks, because he has an inkling that the whole affair may imply a few more connotations.

“It depends on the dragonborns, on the mates' relationships, because for some this is all that it means: trust and nothing else,” Taehyung explains but it's muffled by the way he further nuzzles Jungkook.

“And for others?”

“For some, it can be a display of submission.”

“Oh." The world shifts in its axes around Jungkook. He’s soon swiftly laid on his back atop the blanket, Taehyung above him.

“I suppose it’s due to the fact that we’re partly bestial due to our draconic heritage,” Taehyung starts and braces himself on one hand next to Jungkook’s head, settled between Jungkook’s parted legs, “but some dragonborns enjoy determining certain dynamics between them. Or they like the game of doing so without ever confining themselves into any kind of role. It tends to happen before the wedding.”

Jungkook peers up at Taehyung as he plays with the hair curling on Taehyung’s nape. “What happens before it?”

“A dragonborn tradition,” Taehyung answers. His hand has not left Jungkook’s nape where it massages at the skin, his other one soon joining it to cradle the neck. His fingers loosely intertwine at the back, the thumbs dragging up and down the sides of Jungkook’s throat.

It reads like a test that Jungkook complies to by simply laying there and surrendering to Taehyung.

Taehyung hums to himself, the sound pleased and one that he does not appear to notice.

“What's the tradition about?”

“A chase.”

Jungkook perks up. “A chase?”

“Mhm. It usually happens in a deserted place, deep inside a forest, in the mountains, where the likelihood of stumbling on someone is low,” Taehyung explains and absentmindedly rubs the inner side of his wrist on Jungkook’s neck. “Mate A runs away while Mate B has to catch them. Mate A has to find a personal object B hid somewhere within the limits the mates have decided upon.”

“Is it a one way chase?”

“Depends on what the mates want,” Taehyung carries on and he looks more present, enough for the gold to be nearly gone from his irises. “It can be where they both chase each other in turn, or only one chasing the other. Either way, if B catches A, B wins, but if A finds the object before B catches them, A wins.”

“So, similar to animals,” Jungkook starts and discards the pointed look Taehyung throws at him, “some kind of dominance hierarchy can happen between mates?” Taehyung nods. “Then is the winner the more dominant one?”

“No, not necessarily at all,” Taehyung says, his wrists now stroking along Jungkook’s shoulders and collarbones.

Jungkook must be *drenched* in Taehyung’s scent.

“Especially if they chase each other in turn. The winner doesn’t matter, it’s the hunt in itself that does.”

“How come we didn’t do it?” Jungkook blurts out and can’t experience an ounce of regret for doing so when he’s being pinned on the blankets by Taehyung who has been scenting Jungkook for God knows how long. Jungkook had expected the affair to be quick and dismissed within a minute, yet Taehyung doesn’t seem to be anywhere near done.

“I didn’t want to.”

“It sounds fun though.”

Taehyung’s gaze drifts on Jungkook. “You’d like to be chased?”

Yes .

“I didn’t say that,” Jungkook retorts, ignoring the excitement that flashes in him at the idea of a lethal dragonborn hunting him down. “And why are you assuming you’d be the one going after me?”

“Because you’d enjoy that. I think you enjoy when people chase after you, and I think you’d especially like it if it’s me.”

It’s true.

Jungkook denies it.

“No, I don’t.”

Taehyung hums a chuckle. “Sure.”

Jungkook purses his lips but he allows his head to be tilted to the left so that Taehyung can continue scenting him there. “If we had been on better terms at the wedding, would you have liked to do the chase?

“Could have been fun,” Taehyung shrugs, focused on his task, his eyes remaining a tad lighter than how they usually are.

“To determine certain things?”

“I don’t think we’d need this to determine anything.”

“Why not?”

Taehyung stops his ministration. He grasps Jungkook’s chin, his hold loose. He gently moves Jungkook's head this and that way, Jungkook pliant under any and every touch of the dragonborn. Jungkook’s lids flutter and his breath hitches when Taehyung’s palm and fingers cups his throat.

“I wonder,” Taehyung says and pulls back to resume his previous task.

Jungkook can’t tell how much time passes where he remains laid on his back, Taehyung knelt between his legs and scenting him, however a deep sleepiness wraps around his mind, his thoughts entirely narrowed down to Taehyung. It’s as though Taehyung commands Jungkook’s attention and docility through his words, his gaze, his hands; rewarding it all with tender touches that elicit soft twists and flutters in Jungkook’s belly.

It’s when Taehyung makes another pass of his wrist on Jungkook’s throat that Jungkook says “Can I do it too?”

“Do what?”

“The wrist thingy.”

Taehyung pauses. He sits up and quietly surveys Jungkook for a moment. “Go ahead.”

Jungkook lowers his hands down Taehyung’s arms then pulls on them. Taehyung answers the mute request and supports himself on his palms that he places near Jungkook’s hips. Jungkook could have instead sat up as well, but he prefers this: having Taehyung above and around him, wholly taking over Jungkook’s senses.

Happy now that he's caged by Taehyung, Jungkook brings his hands to the joint of Taehyung’s neck and shoulders. He brushes the inner side of both of his wrists there, wondering what kind of message it will send to the sleeping group of dragonborns.

What if they believe Taehyung had his ways with Jungkook, as Taehyung had said to Jimin?

Jungkook discards the thought with heated cheeks.

He glances at Taehyung who’s already staring back at him and he quickly averts his gaze, coy under Taehyung’s scrutiny. “Does the chasing tradition only exist to figure out a hierarchy of dominance?”

“No,” Taehyung says, his minty breath tickling Jungkook’s cheek. “It’s also to ascertain compatibility, and most importantly strengthen the mates' bond. It’s a bonding experience at its core. The mates spend time together, have fun, take care of each other and things like these. The chase is full of mutual respect, amusement and care.”

“That sounds really nice,” Jungkook mumbles and he’s distracted by the way the collar of Taehyung’s shirt droops low, creating a pocket that allows the curves of his chest and navel to peek out. “Does it only occur before the wedding?”

“It can happen at any time. Some mates like to have yearly, monthly or weekly chases. Sometimes even more. It varies for every couple.”

“So we could have that chase? Even if we’re not mates,” Jungkook hurries to add. “It just sounds really fun."

When Taehyung doesn’t reply right away, Jungkook glances at him and catches the playful curve on Taehyung’s lips.

“Sounds a lot like you want to—”

“Chase you. Yes. That’s true,” Jungkook cuts in and makes a happy sound in response to Taehyung’s huffed chuckle. “Could we? For fun? I’d catch you easily, I think.”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

It’s not a ‘no’, Jungkook smiles to himself but also to Taehyung. “M’kay."

Taehyung seems to enjoy being scented by Jungkook, or perhaps he simply grows sleepier because his posture relaxes.

“Have you ever scented anyone?”

“Not like this, no. I only scented my family but it’s always rare and only with my wrists. I’ve never been big on scenting people." Taehyung keeps glancing at Jungkook’s neck and angling his head toward it before straightening up.

“What do I smell like?”

“Death."

“Shut up,” Jungkook laughs and pinches him.

“And flowers. The smokey floral kind you have sometimes,” Taehyung says and Jungkook can see the internal debate Taehyung goes through. He must surrender to it because he buries his face against Jungkook’s throat, deeply breathing in there. “Burnt caramel too. A lot of it. But it’s taken over by another scent.”

“Which one?”

“Mine,” Taehyung rasps.

If Jungkook could purr to translate how *pleased* he is by that sole word, he would, however he contents himself by sliding his hands under Taehyung’s shirt to caress the scars on the shoulder blades. “What do you smell like?”

“I was told I smell like petrichor,” Taehyung says and it corresponds with the smell of rain Jungkook has caught whiffs off every now and then. “But it shifts depending on which breath I use.”

"So it's why you smell like embers when you use your fire."

“Yeah. Right now you—” Taehyung's breath is heavier and slower, as if fully taking in Jungkook's scent. “You smell like you and me. Like us."

Jungkook shivers, both from Taehyung’s words and the way Taehyung's mouth makes Jungkook's body flutter with butterflies of bliss.

“Our scents mingled, which is the purpose of scenting, among other things.”

“Other things like what?”

“Don’t say it, but it’s also a way to… To mark one’s territory, so to say.”

“Like a do—”

“I said don’t say it,” Taehyung reprimands and tweaks Jungkook’s side.

Jungkook already knows the answer, yet he asks “So when I will step out of our tent later, what will everyone think?"

“That you’re mine."

Jungkook’s heart stutters in his chest, the itch so pleasingly scratched.

“I like that.”

"Yeah?” Taehyung chuckles.

“Yes…"

“Of course you do, draconic viper,” Taehyung says, sounding fond. However he huffs and puffs then clicks his tongue seconds later. He sits up, his brows furrowed and eyes still adorned with the faint honey hue. “Can I take off your shirt?”

Jungkook blinks a couple times. “Yes?”

Taehyung unceremoniously removes the — apparently — offending shirt and tosses it aside before pulling up the sleeves of his own shirt. He leans down above Jungkook and he encircles Jungkook's waist and back in a hug that Jungkook doesn’t think Taehyung realizes to be doing.

Jungkook sighs and closes his eyes when the skin of Taehyung’s arms comes into contact with his spine. “Better?” Jungkook wonders.

Taehyung emits a noncommittal sound. “The shirt was in the way and smelling like others." He proceeds to scent the parts that the pajama top was blocking, like the full expanse of the collarbones. His right hand drags up Jungkook’s spine.

Taehyung's hand drags along Jungkook's spine, and Jungkook arches the slightest curve when the nails scratch by a sensitive spot he had never known the existence of. "Taehyung…"

"Fuck."

Jungkook tries to remind himself that it is initially done to reinforce the pretense, that it does not mean *anything.* He fails when an urgency coats Taehyung’s motions, as though nothing is quite enough yet.

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung shushes Jungkook and he sits up to card a hand through his hair, staring down at Jungkook. “This is stupid,” he says and plasters both of his hands on Jungkook’s neck that he kneads for a second. He cradles the throat next then the naked shoulders, rubbing his wrists in his path.

“What is?” Jungkook wonders but Taehyung does not even hear him.

Taehyung has a drowsy look on his face, his eyes bleary. And golden, the tint entirely taking over the irises and punctuated by the dilated pupil at the center. Taehyung mumbles something intelligible..

“What is it?”

“S’just—” Taehyung’s head dives in Jungkook’s neck once more, his hands cupping Jungkook’s waist in a clamp that would restrict Jungkook down if he wasn’t already docile. “My dragon.”

“What about it?”

Taehyung exhales through his nose that he drags upward, halting right underneath Jungkook’s ear where his next words are murmured. “You smell so good right now… I don’t know why.”

Jungkook’s limbs react to the declaration before his mind can process it, feeling barren and wanting to hide. His legs clench around Taehyung’s hips, yet unable to close with Taehyung between them, and then renege the urge at once when Taehyung curls a hand around Jungkook's upper thigh in a mute demand. Jungkook obediently unwinds.

Jungkook exhales a shaky breath.

His mind is quiet, his thoughts and worries are too. It’s all about Taehyung: keeping him close, letting him do as he wishes, and Jungkook wants it all, the beast of his greed mollified and quivering in unadulterated bliss.

“Our scents are so potent and heady,” Taehyung rasps near the back of Jungkook’s ear. “I can taste them.”

“Taehyu—”

“Didn’t expect for our scents to be so pungent and good together,” Taehyung carries on, his words slurred together. “S’weird.” His parted mouth brushes Jungkook’s throat. “Smell divine..."

Something wet grazes Jungkook’s throat. It’s fleeting and gone in a split second, but he freezes when he realizes what it had been. “Tae, you—”

“S’ry. Sorry. Didn’t mean to do that,” Taehyung mumbles. “It’s just…” His mouth presses where his *tongue* had accidentally flickered on Jungkook. “Intoxicating.”

Jungkook bites down on his lower lip but it does nothing to muffle the soft sound that escapes his lips. “Do you like it?”

Taehyung hums and the noise is a bit odd. It’s more of a deep, distant rumble coming from Taehyung’s chest but it quietens so fast that Jungkook wonders if he has dreamed it.

Taehyung moves and before Jungkook can utter any protest, he’s lifted off the ground as Taehyung sits up straight and crosses his legs. Jungkook settles on Taehyung’s lap, wrapping his legs around him and only satisfied when their chests are pressed flush. Taehyung drops his head on Jungkook’s shoulder and loosely embraces Jungkook, shuffling closer until his nose is buried in Jungkook's neck.

Then he stills.

Jungkook plays with Taehyung's hair, scratching his nails on the scalp, and he hopes that this moment won't be an ephemeral one.

"You smell s'good."

Jungkook muffles his smile against Taehyung's crown. "You smell good too. Are you okay?"

"I'm sleepy."

"Then sleep, Tae."

Taehyung hums and slouches against Jungkook. He grows heavier against Jungkook, his arms slackening in their hold and dangling behind Jungkook.

Jungkook cups the back of Taehyung's head to make sure that it doesn't fall when he moves. He cranes his neck to the side to peer at him as best he can.

Taehyung's lids are shut, his cheek squished atop Jungkook's shoulder and his mouth faintly part open around little puffs of air. Taehyung's hair is an absolute mess and Jungkook, a smile tugging at his lips, gently combs the tousled strands of the sleeping dragonborn. Minutes later, Jungkook cradles Taehyung against his chest anew, the beast in him lulled to a satiated slumber.

Jungkook hums a melody to keep himself awake, refusing to abandon a single second of this precious lull in time.

Taehyung eventually makes a noise and mutters something about caramel and another subject that Jungkook can't decipher because it's immediately muffled in the alcove of his neck.

The silence that follows suit is broken by a long, loud yawn.

"Good morning again," Jungkook laughs.

"Hm." Taehyung intertwines his fingers on Jungkook's lower back. "Fell asleep?"

"Yes. For a little while. Or a long while, I'm not sure," Jungkook says, having lost all sense of time.

Dozens of voices float outside of the tent that is now bathed by sunlight, the group most likely beginning to pack their belongings to prepare for their departure later today.

"We should get out," Jungkook says and cards a hand through Taehyung's fluffy hair.

"Mhh… And if—" A yawn. "I say no."

"Then we don't." The fact that Taehyung still wants to stay in the cocoon of their tent after waking up forms a tiny spark of hope within Jungkook.

Perhaps Taehyung will want to repeat this in the future.

“But we should leave.”

“But we should leave,” Jungkook echoes and internally laughs at how disgruntled Taehyung sounds.

Taehyung lifts his head and if he had seemed out of it before, he now looks completely gone *and* half asleep. His eyes retain a sliver of gold in them that forms a ring around the pupils and mingles with the dark brown. He lowers his head a moment later to, well, *sniff* Jungkook.

Taehyung hums to himself, and Jungkook would dare believe that it sounds pleased.

“Come on,” Taehyung says and pushes on Jungkook’s waist.

Jungkook gets the message and climbs off Taehyung's lap, however not without a reluctant pout. He looks around for his shirt and when he finds it, he reaches for it and for the winter cloak.

“Wait.”

Jungkook turns toward Taehyung in time to see him smoothly slide his own shirt off and hand it to Jungkook.

“You’re fine putting mine on?” Taehyung offers.

Jungkook’s answer comes in the form of an eager throw of his own shirt and a snatch of Taehyung’s that he rapidly pulls over his head.

Just in case Taehyung changes his mind.

The shirt is warm as it swathes Jungkook and it’s accompanied by whiffs of rain and smoke and a hint of musk that all mingle together into a familiar scent . “If I ever refuse, then I’m not the real Jungkook.”

Taehyung snorts, inelegant and trailed by yet another yawn. He rises into a crouch and he fiddles with the tent' zipper that he opens. Jungkook joins him on his knees, waiting for Taehyung to exit the tent to follow him outside, however Taehyung does none of this quite yet.

A hand cups the base of Jungkook’s neck, the fingers tightening to tilt his head backward and give space for Taehyung to nose at Jungkook’s throat.

Taehyung leans back with a hum and releases his hold on Jungkook. He nods to himself then tugs the makeshift door open to step outside.

Jungkook stares blankly at the brightened camp.

All at once, Jungkook questions if the past hours have all been a figment of his imagination.

Taehyung peeks inside the tent. He extends a hand that Jungkook takes and Jungkook exits the tent. “You’re hungry?” Taehyung asks.

“I am."

Taehyung lets go of Jungkook to march off where some meat, eggs and more goods are lined up.

Jungkook blinks. “Okay? Okay,” he reiterates to himself. On autopilot, he makes his way toward the table/boulder to serve himself a much needed cup of water, his mind still muddled from what occurred.

Did it actually happen? Maybe Jungkook has finally gone—

“By the Elders. You both had your fun last night, huh?”

Jungkook startles hard enough to spill half of his cup’s content. His gaze darts on Jimin. “What?”

Jimin shuffles near Jungkook. “He scented you, didn’t he? I can smell him all over you.”

“Yes,” Jungkook says and ducks his head. “Is it that obvious?”

“Like a red dragon in the middle of a white sea.”

“Oh. I— Well… It’s—” Jungkook pauses. “I don’t know how it’s supposed to feel, but it was so nice. He was so… touchy? Usually there’s a barrier, you know? He doesn’t hug me out of his own volition unless I ask for it first. But there he just… He took what he wanted.”

Jungkook peers at Jimin who’s looking behind Jungkook. Jungkook glances in the same direction.

Taehyung is sitting on a fallen log, lazily poking at the blazing campfire, a plate in his hand.

“Say,” Jimin starts and surveys Jungkook, “what color were his eyes while scenting you?”

“His usual dark brown.”

“Ah.”

“But they shifted to golden several times, and they kept this color for a while before he fell asleep,” Jungkook finishes. “Why?”

Surprise washes over Jimin’s face. Then he snickers with a shake of his head and munches on a piece of dry meat. “I see, I see.”

Jungkook squints at him. “I don’t. Enlighten me.”

“Nope,” Jimin says and pops out the ‘p’. “He fell asleep after scenting you?”

“He did.”

“Damn…”

“Tell me!” Jungkook holds onto Jimin’s elbow, however Jimin quickly frees himself, as if burnt, and takes a step back. "What's that about?"

“I don’t think Taehyung would appreciate it if you smell like someone other than him right now, especially after he scented you,” Jimin clarifies. “I know I wouldn’t.”

“What was it about him falling asleep? You made it sound like a big deal.”

“There’s something about scenting that commonly only happens between mates or really, really, and I mean *really* close family members,” Jimin says. “But scenting makes us feel so good that it can put us into a kind of high sometimes, because we’re ecstatic that we smell like one another. It had happened to me in the past with my ex. I was feeling drunk without having consumed anything at all. It was lovely.”

Jungkook’s face heats up the more he thinks back on the ‘state’ Taehyung had been into, how dazed he had looked yet how driven he had been by his task.

“You smell so good...”

“You smell like us.”

“God.” Jungkook brings the collar of Taehyung’s cloak over his mouth and a subtle waft of musky petrichor travels to his nose. “Does it mean that he liked scenting me?”

“You should ask him, not me.”

“He did look and sound quite out of it…”

“Yeah, because he was probably high on how good yours and his scents smelled together.”

“I want him to scent me again,” Jungkook blurts out, as though Jimin can do anything about it.

“Then ask him.” Jimin sashays away when someone calls out for him.

Jungkook pouts, but he makes his way toward Taehyung nonetheless.

Jungkook doesn’t *parade* , unlike what Taehyung had said, however he does walk with a happy skip to his steps and a confidence that shines even more at the looks he receives from the group of dragonborns.

When Jungkook plops down next to Taehyung, and under the stare of the hunters, Jungkook *does* put on a bit of a show when he inconspicuously pushes a panel of the cloak to display *Taehyung’s* shirt that *he* is wearing.

“How hungry are you?”

“Starving,” Jungkook says.

“I’m fixing you a plate,” Taehyung says. “Why don’t you grab us some tea and coffee in the meantime?”

“Alright,” Jungkook says, happy to comply. He begins to stand but halts when Taehyung utters a *‘Sure?’*. "Yes," Jungkook confirms and presses a kiss on Taehyung’s cheek, wanting to enjoy for as long as he can the fare the pretense feeds him with.

Jungkook pours their drinks into cups, and as he does so, he senses the pair of eyes glued on him. At first he supposes that it’s Woobin, the man having kept his distance this morning.

Then he pivots on his feet and understands that *Taehyung* is the owner of the attentive gaze.

No trace of any kind of emotion passes over Taehyung's face, unnervingly impassive.

Does he regret scenting Jungkook?

So soon?

Jungkook's heart aches at the thought.

"Look at his eyes before you start moping," Jimin comments, who suddenly appears next to Jungkook like the meddling little mouse that he is.

But Jungkook is grateful, because he looks at Taehyung, and his upset disappears.

Some golden brown oscillates in Taehyung's eyes, however not due to the doused campfire, and now Jungkook *wonders.*

Does he like seeing me wearing his shirt and cloak?

Does he want to scent me again?

Or, as a dragonborn with heightened senses, is he reveling in how his and Jungkook's scents have blended together into a potent fragrance that everyone else can pick up on?

Jungkook finds his place by Taehyung's side again a brief moment later. Taehyung's eyes are brown, but when they drift on Jungkook, a subtle, barely noticeable hint of honey lightens the irises. It vanishes again seconds later, and this pattern carries on throughout the rest of the morning and afternoon.

The gold comes back full force and consumes the brown when it is time for the group to vacate the camp and fly back home.

Some dragonborns bring Jungkook into accolades or pats on the back while many of the children prefer to hug Jungkook and be picked up by him before scattering away. Youngjae wraps his arms around Jungkook but he sheepishly steps back and scampers when he meets Taehyung's gaze.

Taehyung looks moody, for lack of a better word. He only smiles at the kids — and more specifically Areum.

"Your eyes are golden," Jungkook remarks to Taehyung, most of the group gone by now.

Taehyung looks surprised. He blinks once, and the honey is gone from his eyes. "Not anymore."

Jungkook chuckles and tilts his head, amused. "You were right about your cloak," he begins, his voice sweetened by a deliberate, inviting drawl, "perhaps I do want to be treated in similar ways."

The gold burns anew.

Jungkook wakes up in Taehyung's arms a few days later, a feat that does not fail to elicit internal giggles and tingles. The remainder of the morning is spent showering — while quickly passing over the neck — and eating breakfast with Taehyung.

Jungkook cannot, for the life of him, forget about what has occurred in the tent.

Yet neither he or Taehyung mention it.

Jungkook *really* tries his best to put the scenting affair at the back of his head and fails miserably. His thoughts aren't the only ones occupied with the remnants of this forsaken morning: his body is too.

He shivers in the middle of the day when he thinks back on Taehyung's nose in his throat. Something in his chest plummets when he's reminded of how Taehyung had held him. A warmth flickers in him, coiling in his guts whenever he imagines Taehyung's mouth trailing down his throat and collarbones and maybe even lower or—

Jungkook shakes his head but immediately tumbles back down into his reveries.

His greed has gotten worse as well. He's starved for Taehyung's touch and one would think that the casual touches would suffice, but Jungkook wants more. Jungkook yearns and yearns and it seems to have become an endless pool carved deeper by every graze of Taehyung's fingers.

Taehyung places a hand on Jungkook's shoulder: Jungkook wants it in his hair. If it's on Jungkook's arm: Jungkook wants it on his lower back. And, in the rare — too rare — case where it's on his knee: Jungkook *needs* to have it higher up the thigh. Then Jungkook imagines Taehyung's fingers kneading absent-minded motions at the flesh and Jungkook is hit by a tide of goosebumps.

The worst in all of this is how Jungkook has an inkling that Taehyung has noticed — or will notice soon — because Jungkook's body *always* responds to Taehyung: through quivers, tingles, skin pebbling or a mind-numbing, mollifying bliss where Jungkook simply sags against Taehyung like a boneless doll.

However, one time, one of Jungkook's prayers is answered, and it confirms in his head that he has finally gone mad for good.

That day, Taehyung's hand ends up high on Jungkook's thigh that he taps to grab Jungkook's attention and ask something from him.

Jungkook complies, of course. Because he's good.

And also because Taehyung has this content look on his face whenever Jungkook positively responds to a request or mute demand.

Jungkook loves it.

He probably shouldn't adore it as much as he does, but there is something gratifying about indulging Taehyung because Jungkook achieves it out of his own volition. He *chooses* to please Taehyung, to do well for him, eons away from how he used to be forced to obey. Taehyung even ascertains that Jungkook is complying because it makes him happy, more often than not asking a *'Sure?'* to which Jungkook responds with a happy *'Yes, Taehyung'*.

Plus he's always rewarded one way or another, whether with a touch, a *'Thank you',* or a simple smile. Other times it comes in the form of a gift, with Taehyung carving something for Jungkook like a new jewelry box, the small trap door at the entrance door for Revna, or some painting supplies that Jungkook finds on his work station in a paper bag.

Jungkook feels spoiled, really. He never knew he would get the chance to experience this, that someone would *want* to spoil him to begin with. Not that it's a conscious thing for the dragonborn. Taehyung is clearly clueless, and it only serves to endear Jungkook even more.

It's so good.

Taehyung is so good to Jungkook, which is why Jungkook feels a little guilty for whatever it is that has been going on with him.

Nevertheless, today Taehyung's hand is on Jungkook's upper thigh.

Taehyung leans a bit to the side but the problem is that the movement brings his hand more toward the inner thigh, so between Jungkook's legs. Which isn't too odd. It feels really nice, actually. Perhaps a little too much.

It's as though something has awakened in Jungkook since the morning in the tent.

There's an alien heat that churns in Jungkook's guts and it's bizarre enough for him to mention it to Yoongi and Namjoon later that afternoon.

Namjoon attentively listens, however Yoongi crudely interrupts him.

"You're sexually frustrated," Yoongi states like it's supposed to make any sense to Jungkook.

Jungkook gawks at Yoongi because this is all he can do, really.

Yoongi's conclusion is *absurd* and tears a barked out laugh out of Jungkook for several reasons: 1) Jungkook does not do sex, 2) Jungkook never even experienced sexual attraction, 3) what does it have to do with Taehyung?

"I'm just saying it's a possibility," Yoongi shrugs then walks off to meet up with Hoseok.

Whether Jungkook agrees or not with Yoongi, the mention of sex brings forth its absence in Jungkook's life.

He has always been sheltered from it. All that Jungkook had known had been that he should dedicate himself and his body to pleasuring his husband. So Jungkook rarely indulges in self pleasuring. He can't remember the last he has, actually. Maybe months ago? He definitely hasn't since he moved to Vanae nearly three months ago.

Jungkook simply doesn't enjoy it. He supposes that it feels nice on the spot but once it's over, it leaves him empty and bored, thinking about how he would have preferred to read a book instead.

However, now that Yoongi has mentioned sexual frustration, Jungkook is curious.

What does it feel like? Can one handle it on their own? What is the cause of it?

Thankfully, Jungkook knows someone who may have the answers to these questions.

“Oh! If it isn’t our lovely prince,” Jimin grins and hugs Jungkook.

It’s a nice biscuit, Jungkook thinks to himself. “Are you busy today?”

“Yes, but I’m working on some boring utensils commissions so I’ll happily take the distraction after the hundreds of spoons I’ve been making,” Jimin says and steps aside to let Jungkook inside his abode. “Taehyung dropped you there?”

“He did,” Jungkook nods and sits down on Jimin’s couch. He clasps his hands together and squeezes them between his thighs, feeling nervous all of a sudden.

“What’s up? You look like you’ve got a lot going in your head.”

“Uhm…” Jungkook fiddles with his wedding band, peering at the storm in it.

“What is it?”

“It’s about a personal matter. As in… Really personal.”

“Alright?” Jimin sits down in front of Jungkook on the coffee table. “We’re alone. Woobin’s out somewhere.”

Jungkook nods. He fidgets with his cuticles then he says “For the past few days I’ve been— I’ve been wondering about some things.”

“Is this about sex?”

Jungkook’s head darts up. “How did you know?”

“Call it a wise hunch,” Jimin pompously smiles. “I remember you mentioning that you’re curious about it.”

“Yeah. I guess. I’ve grown more curious lately and I’m just… I don’t know. Needy. Not for sex though, but Yoongi said it might be sexual frustration? So I’m trying to understand if he’s correct or not,” Jungkook huffs. “But I never had any sex drive at all, so I don’t know what he’s talking about. I didn’t even know people could be sexually frustrated.”

“Well, sex drive and sexuality is definitely something that can evolve over time. If this or that happens, if you meet this or that person. It can change how your body reacts,” Jimin says. “There’s also the environment.”

“The environment?”

“You left the Citadel. You’re a lot more free now, so it might unlock some things in you, so to say, like your sexuality that you can freely explore.”

“Oh. Yes. I had not thought of that,” Jungkook says and his excitement must betray him because Jimin’s smile grows.

“We can go to that one exotic shop I told you about.”

“And show my face there? No. God no.”

“There’s a spell around the shop that changes everyone’s face to the exact same one, so no one will know who you are,” Jimin reassures.

“What do they sell there?”

“Sex toys, accessories, products and a plethora of other fun things.”

“Sex toys?” Jungkook says with a cant of his head. “What’s that?”

Jimin’s grin turns wolfish. “Want to see?”

The main issue now is that Jungkook has taken his whole *‘Let’s enjoy ourselves and not overthink’* both a tad too seriously and leisurely, as it must be the only reason why has agreed to visit one of Vanae’s sex shops.

A sex shop .

Because those apparently *genuinely* exist.

Jungkook is feeling fairly confident, surprisingly. Half because Jimin is here, and half because the hunting trip had been so lovely and special that it has filled Jungkook with serenity and the wish to practice some more hedonism while he can.

Or rather, this is what Jungkook tells himself to tame down his apprehension as he and Jimin enter a shop that looks quite normal from the outside, yet couldn’t be anything but that on the inside.

“Dear God…”

“Welcome to my most favorite heaven.”

Aside from the boutique’s employees, the interior is brimming with people all adorning the same face, as Jimin had promised to Jungkook, however this is not what stuns Jungkook the most.

It’s the array of shelves and display cases brimming with objects more colorful than the others and God knows what. There are even some cuffs and ropes and Jungkook cannot begin to comprehend *why* there would be such things in a sex shop. Is this some kind of proclivities people indulge into? Or is this shop more than what meets the eye?

There are also penises everywhere.

Or rather ‘dicks’, Jungkook mentally corrects as he thinks back on the inane debate he had once had with Taehyung.

It’s a tad daunting and Jungkook grips onto Jimin’s arm.

“Now,” Jimin begins, “will you allow me to corrupt your innocent mind, prince of ours?”

“I’m not innocent,” Jungkook scoffs.

“You didn’t know what sex toys were.”

“I know what sex is.”

“And do you know what a ball gag is?”

“A what?”

“Exactly.” Jimin greets the man behind one of the counters. “So, when you say that you’re curious, what does that entail?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook shrugs as he and Jimin walk through the store. He squints at an object that looks like… something.

“You’re gay, right?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever wondered how intercourses can occur between two men?”

“I mean… I know about—” Jungkook’s gaze darts around and he lowers closer to Jimin to whisper next to his ears. “I know about anal sex, since I was expected to pleasure my husband, but I’ve never looked into it? I did question how it works and the hygiene of it but that’s all.”

“Alright,” Jimin says with a nod. “Well, first off…”

Jimin launches himself a detailed explanation of the technicality of anal sex and its cleaning process too as he and Jimin pass by rows of bottles, some of them holding supposedly helpful pills.

Jungkook carefully listens.

His initial awkwardness fades away at Jimin’s blunt and clinical approach to the subject, but also because he reminds himself that everyone present in the shop is here with a common drive.

Then, Jimin mentions some toys that Jungkook may be interested in if anal sex isn’t something he wants to try. One of them is called a ‘fleshlight’. The thing is odd, but it ignites Jungkook’s curiosity, enough for Jimin to pick one of them and place it in their basket.

“Have you gone all the way before with a man?” Jungkook quietly asks Jimin who’s rifling through some bottle of scented lubricants — because according to Jimin, if Jungkook ever wants to dab into trying new things while pleasuring himself, lubricant is ‘vital’.

“Yeah. I like taking or being taken. Both are fun.”

“I don’t understand how it could feel good to be taken.”

“One word: prostate. Among other things,” Jimin says. “Once you get more used to it, it’ll start feeling good in general even if your partner can't find your prostate for the life of them.”

Jungkook knows what this tiny organ is. He did learn biology when he had found out about his necromancy.

It doesn't clarify anything, still.

"What about it?"

"It's an erogenous zone, to put it simply. It can be tricky to find on your own. However…" Jimin trails off and pulls Jungkook toward a glass shelf that he slides open. He brandishes an object to Jungkook a few seconds later. "This will help you. We're buying it," he says with finality.

"Okay?"

"It's not that big of a toy so you'll be able to take it even as a beginner," Jimin says and Jungkook's cheeks heat up at the idea of 'taking' something *up there.* "It may sound a little scary at first, but it's all about patience, preparation, and lube. Lots, and lots, and lots of lube. If you think you've used too much: add more."

"Alright," Jungkook chuckles, happy that he can share this kind of thing with someone, and that said someone is Jimin. "This is really interesting."

"Right? Sex isn't for everyone. Some people don't find it fun at all, but I certainly do. I think you will too now that you can enjoy yourself," Jimin says. "You've got any questions?"

"Plenty."

"Ask away."

And so Jungkook does, firing question after question.

He never could have anticipated that talking about sex for nearly two hours could be both so entertaining and educating, but it is, and Jimin is incredibly patient with Jungkook, something that Jungkook is greatly thankful for.

The two of them eventually exit the shop, Jungkook's coin pouch empty yet his hand heavier with the paper bag he's holding.

They settle down at the outside of a tavern where they remain for several hours until the sun begins to set and paint the sky in purples and oranges.

They fly back to Jimin's house at around 7pm, the two of them entering the house.

"I can't believe I've gone to such a shop and bought from it," Jungkook says and plops down on an armchair. "Seohyung would roll in the grave I'd dig for her."

"Was fun though."

"It was," Jungkook says and echoes Jimin's giggle with his own. "I learned a lot. Thank you for taking me out today," he adds and peers at Jimin. "It was really nice but also out of the blue, so…"

"You should know by now that I love our little dates and spending time with you," Jimin smiles and slouches on the couch next to Jungkook.

Jungkook straightens up at the mention of dates. “Speaking of,” he starts and Jimin heaves a deep sigh. “How are things going with you and Yoongi?”

“How so?” Jimin's act of nonchalance does not fool Jungkook.

“He told me you two have been hanging out a lot lately.”

Jimin shrugs. “He’s fun.”

“Aaand? Tell me more. I’m nosy.”

“And nothing, Jungkook,” Jimin says. “He’s nice and— And if I had met him before then maybe something could have happened but now I—” He pauses. “I refuse to be in any kind of relationship, aside from purely sexual.”

“Yoongi is good.”

“I know.”

“I think he’d be good for you.”

“I also know that. He already is,” Jimin admits with a hushed voice, his gaze cast low on his lap.

“Are you scared?”

“I’m terrified.”

Jungkook grabs Jimin’s hand that he cradles between his own, their fingers interlocking together. “Is this about the ex boyfriend you told me about?”

Jimin nods and slumps against the backrest with a sigh. “I was deeply, unconditionally in love with him. We had known each other for years and I fell hard for him, from heart to soul. I gave everything I had and was,” he says and rests his head on Jungkook’s shoulder. “I thought he had too. I was certain we would become mates in the future. Everything in me saw him as my mate already.”

“He didn’t.”

“Yeah… I learned that he had been cheating on me for months. It’s a boring story, really, of someone that is too naive and another that does not care enough. Still left me heartbroken and just —” He rubs a palm on his face. “My confidence shattered. My happiness shattered. *I* did. I was a mess, drowning myself in one night stands, mindless sex, fights and doing stupid shit.”

“Where’s this ex now?” Jungkook wonders, anger rising in him.

“Oh he ran away Elders know where after Taehyung found out what happened and beat his ass.”

“Good. He better not come back or I’ll put to use the dagger you made for me.”

Jimin bursts into laughter. “Thanks, Jungkook.”

“You know, Yoongi doesn’t let people in either because of how everyone around him has always seen him as a mean to an end, as someone to use for his knowledge and arcane,” Jungkook says and

thinks back on how worn out Yoongi has been since a young age, forced by Seohyung to work over and over again even when Yoongi would be at the brink of collapsing. “But he told me how tranquil spending time with you is.”

“He did?” Jimin says and there’s a lilt to his voice that Jungkook believes to be hope.

“Yes,” Jungkook snorts. “He keeps rambling about you, it's cute.”

“No. He doesn’t.”

“*‘Jimin made this wonderful sculpture”, “Jimin volunteered to help me with a job”, “I was supposed to work but Jimin and I went outside instead.”* It’s constant. Jimin this, Jimin that. Jimin is so cute, Jimin is so kind, Jimin is—”

“By the Elders,” Jimin interrupts and moves away from Jungkook to plaster his hands over his face. “I don’t want to know.” He halts. “Tell me more.”

Jungkook laughs. “You should try to let him in, even if it’s scary. It doesn’t have to mean anything. Yoongi can just be a friend.”

“Yeah,” Jimin muses and drops his hands. “I’ll think about it.”

“Really?”

Jimin peers at Jungkook. He shyly nods. “Really, and—” His head twists around. He rises to his feet and makes his way toward the exit door that he swings open. “Your dragon’s here.”

“My what?” Jungkook cranes his neck to look outside and he catches sight of a breathtaking white dragon that turns mid hair into an equally breathtaking man. “Taehyung,” he grins and springs up, walking to the doorway. “Hi,” he stupidly says, sounding way too fond for his liking.

“Hey,” Taehyung answers and he doesn’t smile, per se, but his face softens.

“Riveting conversation,” Jimin quips.

“Fuck off,” Taehyung snaps and Jimin does however not without guffawing.

“What are you doing here?” Jungkook asks.

“I’m going out for a few hours with my hunting squadron to prepare a couple things. I just wanted to warn you before I leave,” Taehyung explains. “I’ll be back later during the night.”

“Aww!” Jimin croons from his workshop. “How quaint! Coming here to warn your husband of your departure!”

Taehyung rolls his eyes and Jungkook steps outside, closing the door behind him. “When will you be back?”

“Around 3am, I think. Probably later, actually.”

A vision of a paper bag flashes in Jungkook’s mind.

If Taehyung is gone tonight, then Jungkook will have the house to himself and—

“You can go to my parents’ house or stay with Jimin if you don’t want to be alone.”

“Oh no, it’s fine! I’ll stay at our house.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You’ve got the bracelet and ring with you?”

“I do. I’ll be fine. And I’ve got Revna with me as well.” Jungkook then playfully adds “Are you worried?”

“I am.”

Jungkook’s heart stutters. “Oh.”

“I’ve been feeling uneasy since the manor clusterfuck and it got worse after my fight with the Council,” Taehyung mutters.

“I’ll be safe, I promise. Jimin will fly me to our house after dinner and I’ll stay put until you come back. Plus your parents are nearby if anything happens.”

“Yeah. Right.” Taehyung cards a hand through his hair. “Eat well,” he says and begins to turn around.

“Wait.” Jungkook stills, unsure on how to ask for what he wants without being overbearing. “Can you…”

Taehyung must pick up on Jungkook’s hesitation, or perhaps he has grown so familiar with Jungkook’s greed that he can now decipher what it wants before Jungkook can. Nonetheless, Taehyung reduces the distance, cups the back of Jungkook’s head and brings him into a hug.

Jungkook melts under the touch. His hands sprawl on Taehyung’s shoulders as he nuzzles Taehyung’s neck.

Taehyung may never scent him again, however Jungkook won’t shy away from doing so.

Jungkook doesn’t bother muffling his soft sound when Taehyung’s hand scratches his scalp, or when a thumb presses under the lobe of the ear.

Taehyung pulls away seconds later, his gaze darting behind Jungkook then back on him. “Gotta go.”

“Have fun.”

“You too. I’ll see you later.”

Then, without another word, Taehyung shifts into his dragon self and soars through the sky.

Jungkook startles when a hum erupts behind him as Jimin’s house’s door opens.

“I have a feeling you won’t be eating here tonight.”

“I won’t,” Jungkook sheepishly says. “I want to go back to our home.”

“Figured,” Jimin snorts. “I swear to the Elders you’re more of a dragonborn than I am.”

Jungkook eats then he spends an hour thoroughly cleaning himself from head to toe, following Jimin’s earlier advice when they had visited the ‘exotic shop’. He also spends an additional hour and a half studying a book, some kind of guide and instruction manual on, as the title indicates it, masturbation.

Jungkook never knew it could be so complex and it is as exciting as it is nerve inducing.

He locks himself in his own bedroom once done but it feels a little too open even if the night sky outside gives him a sense of cover and privacy.

Jungkook tugs some of the blinds, not fully closing them to let the sky bask his bedroom in teal, navy hues. Jimin had explained the importance of the mood as well, and so Jungkook also retrieves some candles that he neatly arranges on the two nightstands framing his bed.

Deeming his bedroom cozy, bathed in an intimacy that lightens the place in a golden glow, Jungkook stands at the end of his bed.

A nervous and anticipating energy is buzzing through him as he stares at the ominous paper bag.

His heart thrums in his chest when he crawls on his bed to settle at the center, his legs folded and feet tucked under him in a makeshift cushion.

Jungkook fidgets with his fingers then with the hem of his pajama top and lastly with the strings of his cotton pants. He stands seconds later to leave his bedroom and make sure that the house *truly* is devoid of a dragonborn and basilisk.

He enters his bedroom once more minutes later, locks the door and climbs on his mattress.

“Okay,” Jungkook tells himself and wipes his clammy palms on his thighs. Before he can cower, he snatches the paper bag and tips it upside down, the content falling down.

There are three small bottles of lube along with the two toys Jungkook has bought and a harness. What Jimin had called the ‘fleshlight’ is a tad too intimidating for now so Jungkook hastily takes it to place it on his nightstand, the bottles of lube joining the toy.

Jungkook can’t deny that he’s very, *very* curious about the other object laying on his bed.

He’d go as far as saying that he’s quite excited, actually, because he can for once pamper himself, intimately so, and luxuriate in a hopefully good time.

Jungkook would never be eager or anticipatory about pleasuring himself in such ways. It has always felt more like a chore rather than anything else. Up till now, at least.

He tentatively grabs the toy that is entirely black and surprisingly elegant — as elegant as a sex toy can be, Jungkook supposes. It's not especially heavy but not light either, a perfect middle ground. It's quite long and curved, with a girth that Jimin had deemed as 'manageable', with a bulbous form at the tip that Jungkook pokes at.

Jungkook inspects it for a bit, testing its weight and shape in his hand.

With the advice from both the book and Jimin at the back of his head, Jungkook decides to try to shut his mind.

What he's doing is normal. And it's fun. It'll be. But if not, Jungkook can always stop, never look back and burn what he bought today to never look at them ever again.

Jungkook wants to enjoy himself, maybe even care for the potential new facet he has awakened of his greed, and he now can do so however he wants without any looming concern.

Jungkook leaves the toy on the bed and lays down his back, bending a leg up. He places his hands on his pecs and closes his eyes as he slowly rubs his palms up and down his chest. The remnants of his tension ebbs away the more he caresses himself, the more he relaxes and stops thinking so much.

Jungkook remembers reading in the book about how he should 'tease himself' to build up arousal. He removes his shirt seconds later.

He starts with his nipples because his hands are already passing over them. He has never stopped to play with them in the past, but the book said that they can be an erogenous zone for some people. So Jungkook wonders, and it's why he tentatively rests his indexes on each nipple. He presses down on them then he taps them with the pulp of his fingers. It doesn't feel particularly good. Jungkook opts to hold his left nipple between his thumb and index. He tugs.

"Oh," he breathes out when a tingling sensation flickers in him.

This feels nice, Jungkook thinks and rolls the two pink nubs between his fingers. He pulls a little harder on them and when he lets go at some point to glance at himself, he can see how erected and reddened his nipples are, an echo to the warmth that slowly builds in his chest.

He resumes his touches, gnawing on the inner side of his lower lip whenever his palms brush over his nipples. He takes his time though, only playing with the buds once he's actually eager to do so to feel the tingles once more and they appear again, this time a little more intense when he pinches and twists the nubs. He flicks one of them, then, ever so slowly, he rakes his nail on the sensitive skin. The prickle is sharper there, shooting down his body and eliciting a light hiss out of him. But it feels good, and he does it a second time, then a third and a fourth on both nipples.

Jungkook's lids flutter open.

He's not wearing any underwear, and so he can clearly see the outline of his length, how the bulge has, to his shock, fattened up and grown a little hard. He's not fully there yet, but he will soon without needing to touch himself *there* , and Jungkook smiles at the excitement that bubbles in him.

He shuffles on the bed. When he does it pulls on the pajama pants, the fabric sliding over his length. He sighs as his right hand drifts down his naked chest to halt on his thigh. He grabs and squeezes at the flesh of the inner part, his leg reflexively spreading to accommodate himself.

It doesn't take long for him to be fully hard unlike it usually would.

He's soon straining in his pajama pants that he takes off and tosses aside, now fully bare on his bed.

He places both feet on the blanket, then, with a slow, feather light touch, he drags his fingers along his length. His toes curl when he reaches the sensitive, red head. The heat spreads and the arousal pulses through him in soft waves, starting from where he's playing with his nipples and thrumming low in his guts.

Jungkook exhales through his nose when he properly grabs himself, his teeth sinking into his lower lip. He tightens his fingers and draws one slow stroke that prompts his lips to part open around a sigh.

There was some explanation about edging in the book, a topic Jungkook would have never related to sex.

So Jungkook strokes himself a couple more times before reluctantly letting go to lower his hand between his legs and fondle his balls as he tugs a little more harshly on his left nipple. He then trails a finger up his shaft again and this time he stops at the crown. He draws a circle over the glistening head, collecting some of the precum dribbling there but also forming a tiny pool on his navel.

The sight is quite filthy, one that Jungkook has never really seen. He commonly would only masturbate while showering at the citadel, too ashamed and agitated to do so otherwise. Here, however, he can watch without care and revel in how a thin string links the pad of his finger to his length, *his cock,* and the string breaks when he retracts it.

Perspiration begins to create a sheen on him, his body illuminated by the candles and lanterns' flames.

His skin becomes hotter by the second. His guts churn when he forms an 'O' with his thumb and index and he rocks his hip so that the tip of his cock can thrusts in and out of the ring. It's not enough, and so Jungkook curls his fingers around his length to press his thumb on the head.

He whimpers a little sound, his hips kicking up when he digs his nail into the slit and roughly twists his hard nub with his other hand. The figments of pain that travel through his limbs are *heavenly,* his cock twitching in response every time.

Jungkook gets a little bolder soon, needing to take some of the edge off.

He strokes himself while tightening his grip and swiping his thumb at the tip. He's still slow, fighting back the reflexive need to be quick and done within minutes.

He continues this rhythm of alternating between playing with his nipples and cock for a while, working himself up until he's quietly panting in his bedroom and blearily staring at the ceiling. His mind is quiet, his entire body is relaxed, lost in the throes of pleasure.

Jungkook decides that now is as good as a time to try something new.

He lets go of his cock to sit up. He grabs one of the glass bottles, turns the cap open and he watches with muted fascination the way the precum that had been smeared on his fingers smudges on the

bottle, leaving a faint trail on the transparent vial. The lubricant in it is of a transparent color as well, and when Jungkook takes a whiff of it his nose is suffused with the scent of blueberries.

The book said that after being aroused enough, inserting something inside of him should be much easier.

Jungkook doubts it will be. He can't even completely process the idea of having anything *there.* However he did prepare himself for it, and most importantly: he's curious. Horribly, lasciviously so.

Jungkook lays back down after placing a pillow under his hips. He carefully tips the bottle and spills its content over the fingers of his right hand. He pours some more over his cock and hisses when the cold liquid meets the heated skin. The lube trickles between his legs and cheeks. It's not enough for Jungkook's taste, so he nearly empties the bottles without much thought.

It's better to have too much.

He pulls at his length a few times, enjoying the way the lube facilitates his movements into smooth up and downs of his hand, or the way his thumb slips when he tries to focus on a sensitive spot underneath the head of his cock.

His right hand inches between his legs. It lowers and lowers, soon reaching his cleft. His heart wildly beats in his chest, thudding between his ears. His motions on his length halt when his middle finger grazes at the rim of his hole.

"It's fine. S'fine," he mumbles. He grants himself some liquid courage in the form of a pinch at the tip of his cock and scraping of his nails at the thin band of skin underneath. It distracts himself from the finger that he places right above his entrance.

It feels odd.

Sticky and wet too.

Maybe Jungkook *did* pour a little too much lube, however it helps when he begins to circle his opening.

He deeply inhales and exhales. Then, without any more overthinking, he sinks the tip of his fingers past the barrier of his rim.

"Oh that's—"

Weird .

It doesn't feel good, but it also doesn't hurt.

He had expected it to sting, however with the amount of lube dousing his fingers and crease, the push is painless, even as he buries his finger up to the first knuckle. The second knuckle is next, and before he knows it, the entirety of his digit is sheathed inside of him.

Jungkook blinks. Then he frowns and lifts his head to stare down at himself. "Okay?" He drops his head back down. "Okay. That's good. It doesn't hurt, so it's good," he tells himself which should be embarrassing but Jungkook has passed the point of such feelings after rejoicing at the departure of

his husband so that he can masturbate. Plus he's happy, because he's trying something new and for *himself only.*

His muscles loosen up, a smile tugging at his lips.

Encouraged by the lack of pain and by the waves of pleasure that tamely spread from where his cock is pulsating in his hand, Jungkook pulls out his finger, waits for a few seconds, then pushes it back in.

It's uncomfortable, like he's having something where it shouldn't be, but even this sensation eventually dissipates the more Jungkook thrusts his finger in and out of him as the minutes elapse. His walls are warm and silky and they feel so relaxed around his finger that Jungkook's confidence emboldens.

He takes out his finger and dribbles what's left of the lube on his hand. He dips it back between his cheeks and he smears the sticky substance there, the scent of blueberries traveling to his nose. He looks down at himself again and it's perhaps a little arrogant how pretty and erotic he finds himself: from his tanned skin pinkened in some places to the flush that envelops him; from the hand playing with his hole between his legs to his other one lazily rubbing his cock and concentrating on the dribbling head every few seconds.

Jungkook pats at his rim with two fingers this time. He pushes in the middle one first, then he stuffs the tip of the second one right next to it.

A heat crawls up his neck as he thinks of the sight he would paint if there was to be an onlooker peeking inside.

He probes at the constricting, warm walls and isn't that an obscene thought to have, to be thinking of how tight he is while he's fingering himself on his bed.

He painstakingly sinks both of his fingers past his rim. The stretch is more significant. It's one that Jungkook can actually feel unlike the previous one that was more of a distant sensation. To his surprise, only a sliver of discomfort arises, made better by the lube but also by the patience Jungkook exerts, taking his time to do some short back and forth of his digits.

When he judges himself loose enough — which is so *salacious* —, he begins some scissoring motions as it had been advised to do in the book.

Maybe Jungkook is being too daring for wanting to add a third finger for his first anal masturbation, but he's really, *really* curious about the toy, and he wants to try it. The toy, unlike his fingers that aimlessly search and probe at his walls, should be able to reach his prostate, and Jungkook wants to know if it feels as good as Jimin had said.

Jungkook releases his hold of his cock to play with his hardened nipples. This feels good, even better when he collects some of the precum pooling on his belly to wet the bud with it in some kind of lewd lube. His hips undulate on the bed and his legs spread as he continues the back and forth motion of his fingers. He tries to find his prostate again, but his fingers are either not long enough or he struggles to locate the bump in this awkward position.

Jungkook doesn't know how much time passes, however the intrusion doesn't feel so foreign anymore.

It’s pretty nice, actually.

What’s strange now is how being empty is what feels uncomfortable, prompting Jungkook to plunge his digits back inside. His pace is still measured, his limbs melted by the more frequent twists of his guts.

When Jungkook adds his ring finger, pain flares for the first time.

The stretch is a little too much, his entrance burning a bit and his teeth come down on his lower lip as he hisses through them. He stills his fingers and strokes his cock with more enthusiasm to detract his mind from the pain.

It works. Slowly, but it does.

The burning quells down after some time.

Quite frankly, Jungkook is pretty impressed at how well he’s doing, at how his body adapts to the intrusion — although he *has* been going excruciatingly slow and using a copious amount of lube.

Jungkook forms a lose fist with his left hand that he leisurely fuck into while baring down on his fingers. He thrusts his digits in, slides them back until they’re nearly out, only to push them in once more. He does this over and over again and the constant caresses of his rim and walls begins to feel *really* good, more precum spurting out of his cock then dribbling down his thumb.

His wrist doesn’t fully cooperate, rendering his movements a little clumsy. It grows tired as well and so does his arm=.

It’d be so much easier if someone was here to help him.

To tell him to lay down and allow himself to be taken care of. Jungkook could fully shut his mind then, not have to lift a single finger.

He imagines himself leaning against someone, his back to a chest, cradled in tender arms. His thoughts wander to a hand, then a second, both gentle as they would trail down his navel, maybe even playfully roll Jungkook’s nipples between their fingers. Perhaps they’d be accompanied by a mouth and *Oh.*

Jungkook lets go of his cock to swipe, twist and scrape his nipple.

Jungkook’s finger is wet from the lube and precum circling the erected nub, and he wonders how a mouth would feel on them, how a tongue would if it were to lap and dart on his nipple. It could be punctuated by teeth that’d gnaw on the skin and his hips buck when he pinches his nipple.

His starved body trembles at the idea of someone caressing him like this.

The Pandora box has been opened, and Jungkook is too selfish to consider closing it.

Jungkook can’t stop imagining how the two hands would trickle down his chest in feather-light brushes. They’d pass by the dip and curves of his abs that’d constrict under the grazes of the fingertips. It wouldn’t suffice, however, at least not until a mouth would capture Jungkook’s nipple and suckle on it.

One of the hands would grip onto the meat of his thigh, near his crotch but avoiding his swollen cock or empty hole. Another squeeze would occur on the inner side of his legs to pull them apart and spread him open and Jungkook does exactly that, lost in his fantasies, his lids falling shut. They'd knead at his hips but ignore his throbbing cock that sits heavy on his navel.

The hands would be teasing, he thinks, his senses taken over by the candles' smoky scent honeyed by the whiff of blueberries.

Jungkook would complain, of course. Perhaps he'd plead. Or maybe he'd tease the hand back by playing with himself and show them the kind of fun that they would be missing out on.

Jungkook knows that the hand would cave in eventually.

One would bat Jungkook's fingers away to grip his cock and give a hard, slow stroke. Jungkook reflects his thoughts as he thumbs at the head of his cock. The thumb wouldn't stop. It'd continue its ministration until Jungkook is left writhing on his sheets and begging for release. Jungkook can nearly hear a chuckle, not mocking, but rather fond and playful.

When Jungkook's hand drifts up and down his length, his fingers disappear from his mind. They're replaced by slender and longer ones. There's even something cold against his cock.

Like metal.

Like a wedding ring.

Like Taehyu—

Jungkook's eyes fly open with a gasp as his hands jerk away from himself.

He peers at the ceiling without seeing anything and he presses the back of his wrist against his mouth.

"Fuck," he, thank God, whispers to no one.

Remembrances of his morning in the tent with Taehyung flash in his mind against his will. *Again.* They remind him of Taehyung's touches, Taehyung's body, his mouth and fingers that had gripped Jungkook's waist and thighs and—

"No." Jungkook throws his arms over his face that he hides in the crook of their elbows. "No no no," he mumbles and closes his legs. "Shut up. God. This can't be happening."

Jungkook absolutely *refuses* to touch himself with Taehyung in his mind. *His husband* . That would, by far, be the most immoral and vile thing Jungkook has ever done.

Right?

Because he'd do this behind Taehyung's back, which is revolting.

Isn't it?

It should be. It really should be.

However Jungkook can't deny the swirl in his belly or the way his cock twitches to attention. His hole feels too empty as well and if it was up to him, he'd sink his fingers back inside but then he would think about Taehyung and this *cannot be happening.*

Jungkook can't do this. He shouldn't. Why would he? He and Taehyung aren't lovers. Taehyung is his friend, for God's sake. Jungkook's companion in leading Vanae and Amaris. Plus Taehyung would never touch Jungkook like this — but he has cupped Jungkook's lower back, hip and upper thigh. Taehyung wouldn't kiss Jungkook outside of the pretense — but he *had* kind of pecked Jungkook's throat when he had scented him.

No matter what, Taehyung wouldn't be alright with Jungkook going through what he has started on this God forsaken night. He wouldn't be, right?

Or maybe he would?

Maybe Taehyung would be curious, he who has shown a boundless interest in Jungkook. Maybe Taehyung wouldn't mind if Jungkook carries on even if Jungkook would never speak a word of this to the dragonborn.

And Jungkook is alone here. It's not like Taehyung will ever know. Yet it's still so immoral and wrong.

Jungkook considers stopping for now to mull over why Taehyung has flickered in his mind tonight, but his cock is flushed red and *throbbing*. Jungkook wants to feel good and it does when he fists the tip of his cock just right and circles the head with his palm.

Jungkook glances down. He twists his wrist to have a full view of the back of his fingers. Entranced, he watches how the silver band of his wedding ring glints under the candle light as his hand moves around his length. "God…"

From what he grasped of the sex shop, what he's currently doing or seeing isn't as obscene as his mind makes it seem to be. However Jungkook feels so impossibly filthy, masturbating while thinking of his husband, staring at his wedding ring soiled in lube and precum.

His greed churns in his chest, and Jungkook decides to feed it himself, his inhibitions thrown out the window by every pulse of pleasure in his veins.

Jungkook can feel the mattress dip at the foot of the bed even if he knows that no one is here, but he's always had a creative imagination, and he allows it to run free.

He parts his legs. He imagines Taehyung nestling himself between them like he had in the tent. He'd lean over as his warm palms would skid up Jungkook's sides. Jungkook caresses his own navel at the thought and he collects some of the precum on the digits of his right hand to use as an additional makeshift lube. He lowers his hand between his legs, avoiding his cock to run circles with his middle finger around his loose rim.

Jungkook knows that Taehyung would tease as he always does, but Jungkook is also aware of the soft spot the dragonborn is surely developing. So Taehyung would relent after some endless teasing that'd leave Jungkook high-strung.

He pretends that Taehyung's fingers are the one to breach past his rim, first only two digits, then the third joining, and Jungkook sighs at the feeling of being full again.

Taehyung's body would be so warm. It always is. His touches would oscillate between gentle and rough: fingers combing through strands then pulling on them, a graze of the hand then a drag of the nails and Jungkook brings life to the last thought when by raking his nails on his inner thigh, the prickle of pain shooting straight to his cock.

He still wants more because of course his greed translates in that aspect now.

Jungkook peers at the black toy.

He takes out his fingers and sits up, the world swaying a bit around him, the bedroom a tad suffocating from the heat that envelops him. He winces at the uncomfortable stickiness between his cheeks but he forgoes it to fold his legs under himself.

He grabs the black harness that he fastens around one of his pillows. There's a placement at the center where Jungkook can attach the toy to give him good support and ensure that it remains up straight no matter how he moves.

After generously pouring lube over its length and securing it on the harness, Jungkook shuffles on his knees, the pillow below him while another one is in front of him.

His vision is hazy, and it aids in imagining that Taehyung is standing behind him.

Jungkook braces himself on one hand as he bends forward, obeying the phantom palm that presses between his shoulders. His hair is wet, some strands sticking to his forehead and nape. Drops of perspiration trickle down his spine that he knows would be covered by Taehyung's heavy body.

His head hangs low to peer at where his other arm is slid between his legs. He places the bulbous head of the toy against his entrance. His walls clench and relax and there isn't a sliver of apprehension when he pushes the head past his opening.

The black toy is thinner than three of his fingers, and so the glide is smooth and easy, a testimony of how eager Jungkook is to have something inside him again.

There's still some sliver of burning sensation but it only serves to heighten the pleasure that courses through his limbs, because on top of all the peculiar matters that single Jungkook out from most people, of course he relishes in a little bit of pain.

Jungkook's knees spread on the blanket and the shaft stretches his walls as it sinks deeper inside him. His cock jerks, the purple head dripping some more precum that seeps into the white bed sheet. Jungkook lowers more on the toy and it feels like an endless drop because the shaft is *much* longer than his fingers. He doesn't stop, however, his hole parting around the girth without much resistance.

"Oh…" Jungkook stills when cotton touches his rear, now fully sat down on the toy from where he's kneeling on the bed.

He supports himself on his hands between his thighs. He deeply breathes in and out as he revels in the fact that he not only managed to slide a toy inside him, but that it was also quite effortless. He's taking it so well, and that sole thought pulls Jungkook back in this imaginary realm where Taehyung is here with him.

Taehyung would murmur praises in Jungkook's ear, wouldn't he? He has been candidly doing so lately, calling Jungkook beautiful, smart and powerful and every other pleasing words that scratch the itch, or that, in a more indecent way, have a heat pool in Jungkook's groin and coloring his skin in pink.

Perhaps Taehyung would kiss some of those praises on Jungkook's nape.

Jungkook imagines that they'd be punctuated by a tight grip on his waist that Taehyung seems to be fond of. The hands would apply a pressure on Jungkook's hip in a mute demand.

And so Jungkook obeys the intangible fingers, his hips moving in slow back and forth. The girth of the toy's head nicely shifts in him and it pulls breathy *'Ah, ah, ah'* that Jungkook can't quieten. He doesn't do much more than grinding on the toy and rotating his pelvis while he gets used to its curved shape, yet it still has him tossing his head back and craving for more.

Jungkook never expected it to be such a carnal experience. He's delirious with it, and the rational part of his mind shuts down.

Taehyung's hands feel so good on him, one of them curling at the front of Jungkook's chest to twist his nipple while the other one continues to guide Jungkook's motions.

"Were you ever aware of how sensitive they are?" Taehyung asks with a pull on Jungkook's hard bud and Jungkook shakes his head, unable to refrain himself from rutting against the toy. *"No? How odd. You're always so ravenous and starved, I'm surprised you wouldn't amuse yourself with them… Or maybe that is why. You knew it wouldn't be enough to satiate your endless greed,"* Taehyung says and Jungkook makes a noise of embarrassment. *"You want more, don't you?"*

"Please," Jungkook pants.

"Go ahead," Taehyung says from behind Jungkook.

Jungkook readjusts his position to have better support on his knees. He gradually rises up until the shaft is nearly fully out, only the head still in him. His thighs shake from the effort of keeping himself upright and so he sits down on the toy, able to feel every inch of the shaft that carves its path through him.

Jungkook has never been loud during the rare times where he would masturbate. He wouldn't even feel compelled to muffle his sounds because he simply wouldn't make any. Yet here he cannot repress his breathy pants or the little noises that are drawn out of him when he begins to slowly ride the toy, wishing that it was Taehyung helping him instead.

He teases himself as Taehyung would.

He lets the bulbous head of the toy catch on his rim, never allowing it to pop out because Taehyung wouldn't let it, Jungkook knows this. Then he bears down on the length and rides it at a pace that picks up by the minute. He pretends that Taehyung is the one moving the toy and fucking Jungkook with it. He pretends that Taehyung is the one controlling the rhythm and Jungkook's movements.

Jungkook shuffles on his spot after a while.

The next time he drops down, a stab of pleasure pierces through him and his cock jerks with a spurt of precum from where it's standing erected against his belly.

Jungkook freezes, his breathing rapid.

He found it.

He maintains the same angle when he rises then sinks down a second later, the toy's head pressing right against what he believes to be his prostate. "G—God, hah, ah…" He sneaks a hand under him, envisioning that it's Taehyung's that readjusts the harness around the pillow to allow Jungkook to move as he pleases.

Now Jungkook doesn't have to worry about the toy tumbling when he starts moving at a faster pace.

He misses his prostate here and there but he feels as though Taehyung is here to readjust the angle so that the tip can hit the sensitive bump dead on.

Everything is hot around Jungkook: the bed, the air, his blushing skin or Taehyung's body that he swears to be sensing the presence of behind him.

Jungkook's cock bobs up and down as he bounces on the toy but Taehyung quickly takes control of the scene as he places a palm on Jungkook's nape and gently bends him forward until Jungkook's face is nestled against the bed.

Jungkook reaches behind himself and he grabs the base of the toy that is buried inside him, right as Taehyung does too. He twists his head to the side, cheeks pressed on the blanket to gulp some air. Taehyung's hand pulls Jungkook's cheeks apart, probably to admire the obscene, lascivious view.

A deep chuckle resounds in the bedroom and Jungkook whines, concealing his face in the bed.

"Why are you acting all shy now?"

"'Cause… Please, need more."

Taehyung hums above Jungkook, twisting the toy but never pulling it out or deeper. *"Should I give you more?"*

" *Yes,* " Jungkook hisses and arches his back, his ass high up in the air. "Hah, Taehyung. Please, Tae, I'm—"

Taehyung shushes Jungkook. *"Let me take care of you, yeah?"* He says behind Jungkook's ear, eliciting a shiver that pebbles Jungkook's skin.

Jungkook and Taehyung's hands pull out the toy. They wait for a few seconds, until Jungkook pleads some more while another hummed chuckle elevates in the bedroom. Then, the shaft thrusts in him once more and the drag is slow. Teasing. With some pauses every few seconds or twist of the toy because Taehyung *is* having his ways with Jungkook.

Jungkook's cock hurts from where it remains untouched. He doesn't want to cave into the temptation of stroking it, worried that he might come on the spot and end the night too soon.

Instead, Jungkook and Taehyung's hands withdraw the toy to plunge it back in, starting a steady rhythm that slowly speeds at every back and forth of the girth filling Jungkook. Jungkook is gasping and moaning in the bed sheet and a full body shiver runs through him when the toy's head nudges his prostate.

“Ah… Found it again,” the imaginary Taehyung says. *“Should we play with it a bit?”*

Jungkook’s nerves are blazing hot and it feels as though each and everyone of them are linked to his weeping cock or to the sensitive bundle in him. The shaft’s head begins to relentlessly press and graze on Jungkook’s prostate and his legs shake, torn between closing or spreading to take more of the toy and feel it deeper.

Jungkook’s arm moves faster, thrusting the toy in and out of his hole that clenches whenever the head teases his rim. Jungkook can hear the squelching sounds of the toy pressing in him, or the way his bed frame ever so slightly creaks under his motions. He can hear his own moans, pants and whines, more lewd than the other one and shamelessly tumbling out of his mouth.

Jungkook wonders if he sounds pretty. Taehyung would probably say that Jungkook does, he thinks as he imagines a hand cupping the front of his throat and tilting his head back.

Jungkook takes out the toy and sits up, not resisting the pull of the phantom hand. He rearranges the pillow beneath him and once satisfied, he drops down on the toy in one, swift movement. This isn’t enough, however. Jungkook needs it faster and deeper and he regrets not having bought a bigger toy that would stretch his wall so *deliciously,* like the swollen head of the shaft in him does.

Taehyung appears to agree with Jungkook’s desires because he holds onto his waist in a bruising grip that Jungkook *prays* will leave marks behind them. Taehyung’s hands are accompanied by lips that mouth on Jungkook’s nape then the back of his ear, whispering about how well he’s taking it and how beautiful, how *good* he’s doing for Taehyung, and Jungkook chases after those words.

He quickens his pace as he rides the toy, the muscles in his thighs burning. “A—Ah, Taehyung, I’m —” Jungkook’s sentence is interrupted by a strangled sob the more he impales himself on the toy, the more the head of the shaft in him incessantly hits his prostate.

“Does it feel good?”

“Yes,” Jungkook whimpers. “Feels, so, hah, ah… S’good. It’s so good, Tae. Please. Please,” he pleads, even if he doesn’t know what for.

“Could feel even better, don’t you think so?”

Jungkook understands what Taehyung means. He doesn’t stop the grinding of his hips as his hand grabs the second pillow and places it under him, right below his cock. Jungkook ruts into it, first the tip of his cock grazing the fabric then the full length and a heated sigh escapes his mouth at the relief of his cock finally being given some attention.

“That’s it… Take what you need, hm?” Taehyung murmurs. *“Make yourself feel good for me.”*

Jungkook does, aided by the intangible hands.

He bucks forward then rises and sinks back on the toy, adopting an erratic rhythm, his body unable to decide on what it wants. If it wants to bounce on the shaft and feel the dizzying pleasure whenever his prostate is hit, or if it wants to grind his cock on the pillow, spasms running through his legs whenever a wrinkle of the fabric presses on the crown just right.

Taehyung’s arms come into view, the forearms and bicep strong, and Jungkook’s thoughts blur into another kind of scene.

He sees himself settled on Taehyung's lap in the armchair.

For a moment, the pillow dissipates from Jungkook's view. It's replaced by black cargo pants punctuated by combat boots and a thigh that he needily rides. Jungkook doesn't care about ruining Taehyung's pants and white shirt. He's too busy savoring how Taehyung is entirely clothed while Jungkook is fully naked, the contrast a testimony of how needy Jungkook is, how positively wanton he is, and the obscene sight the two of them must make prompts Jungkook to accelerate the rolls of his hips.

Maybe there wouldn't be any toys in Jungkook. Maybe it'd be Taehyung's fingers instead and Jungkook keens at the thought that he drowns himself in.

Taehyung's fingers feel so good, so long and agile, never missing the bump in him that they hammer against as Jungkook rams the toy through his walls. Sometimes they pause inside to knead at the sensitive bundle of nerves that seems to be wired to Jungkook's swollen, leaking cock.

Jungkook lifts himself and drops faster, bouncing on Taehyung's fingers while rutting against Taehyung thigh and stomach in hard grinds.

"Are you close?" Taehyung wonders, still guiding Jungkook's motions and Jungkook nods.

"I can't, ah, can't stop… M'gonna— Hah, ah, ah. N—need to come. Tae," Jungkook whines and his thighs hurt but he carries on, so close to his release. "Can I come?"

"Gonna come just like this? From fucking yourself on my fingers, riding my thigh so desperately?" Taehyung chuckles and deeply thrusts his fingers, massaging the walls and prostate. *"I didn't even get the time to undress. Aren't you too eager, my Prince?"*

Jungkook lowers his head, the shame hot on his skin.

Of course Taehyung would be tender yet crude; cradle Jungkook in his arms while bringing him down in a languid kiss that'd leave them panting in each other's mouth; whisper tender praises in one ear while pounding his fingers in Jungkook.

Jungkook's movements grow erratic and rapid, chasing after a searing climax that threatens to submerge him. He rotates his hips to tease his prostate but also his cock that nudges on the pillow in rapid drags, leaving trails of precum that form a wet patch like it would on Taehyung's pants.

Jungkook can feel Taehyung's hand that relentlessly graze his chest and nipples, his back and ass that they squeeze before running down the strong thighs. Jungkook's hips buck forward. Moans freely fall from between his lips.

Jungkook's walls constrict then relax before tightening again around the toy — *Taehyung's fingers* —, and he rides it — *them* — faster and harder, tilting his pelvis to aim for his prostate. "I'm— *Ah,* ah, Taehyung, *Taehyung*. I'm close, I'm close. Can I come? *Please.* I need to come. F—Feels s'good." Jungkook slurs then bites on his lower lip to muffle his moans that have become too loud in the quietness of the bedroom. However fingers cup his chin, one slipping past his lips to part his mouth and press down his tongue.

"I want to hear you," Taehyung says. *Demands . "Don't hide anything from me."*

Jungkook nods and immediately complies. Staccato of moans erupt in the bedroom, intersected by his slurred babbling of how good he feels and how deep Taehyung's fingers are as he eagerly rides them. Taehyung's hand leaves scorching trails on Jungkook's spine that curls inward, the prickles soothed down by caresses.

Jungkook can feel himself being cradled by a strong arm tenderly holding him. He gorges onto the praises that are murmured with kisses against his lips, cheeks and forehead.

Jungkook wants to kiss Taehyung.

He wants it soft and tender, with slow presses of their lips and gentle nibble of teeth. He wants it lascivious and passionate, rendered urgent by the need to let their tongues meet and graze each other in a maddening, deep kiss that will leave Jungkook breathless.

He wants it to be real and not prompted by any pretense.

Jungkook brings his left hand to his mouth. The white gold ring is warm, the storm tamely swirling in the diamond. He passes the ring over his lower lip, enjoying the feeling of the gem's sharp edges in contrast to the metal band.

With his other hand, Jungkook grips onto the pillow like he would on Taehyung's shirt. He rides the toy like he would with Taehyung's fingers or even Taehyung's cock and the thought nearly topples him over the edge, his guts tightening around the knot of heat coiling in his groin. His toes curl and he squirms the closer he inches toward his release, the more all that he can think about is Taehyung.

Jungkook wants Taehyung so much that it hurts.

His skin aches for Taehyung's touches, his body writhes for Taehyung's hands and attention and affection. It all coalesces and wrenches at a spot within him where his greed lives and thrives, and he doesn't know what to do with this abrupt revelation.

With the epiphany that he wants it all from Taehyung.

It's sudden when the orgasm crashes onto him in between two *'Doing so good for me'* and *'So breathtaking'* and the sensation of a hand on his nape.

Jungkook seizes on the bed, his back arching as he throws his head back around a mute moan that soon turns into a high, needy keen. Incessant shudders wrack through his limbs one after another as the strained bundle of his releases bursts.

His cock spills on the pillow, more cum spurt out of the head and soaking through the fabric. Jungkook gasps and pants and a sob catches in his throat as he humps the pillow and rocks against the shaft stuffing him. He leans forward and braces on his hands. His hole convulses the more his hips bucks and the over sensitivity that tingles through every cell of his is so *divine.* His orgasm feels endless, fed by the waves of pleasure that pulsate through him every time his cock buries into the pillow, or when the toy's head nestles his prostate.

Jungkook eventually stops when he collapses on his side as exhaustion slams onto him. His heavy breathing is loud, his chest rapidly heaving up and down. He closes his eyes, his mind a little too hazy. He remains like this for a while as he tries to get his bearing straight again.

Jungkook thinks that he has dozed off at some point — which is horrifying considering that he fell asleep naked, covered in all sorts of fluids and with a toy in his ass.

Thankfully, he cannot hear anyone in the house, and his dizziness has waned off.

Jungkook reaches behind him to grab a hold of the toy's base. He winces when he pulls it out then drops it on the bed. The emptiness is weird and so he slips two digits inside of him.

If only it was Taehyung's fingers keeping him full and—

Jungkook snatches out his fingers.

"Oh my God."

He springs up but hisses when an uncomfortable ache flares in his rear.

The shame slowly creeps up on him, then mortification does too. He flops on his back and takes his pillow to smother his face in it — on the clean side.

He got off thinking about Taehyung.

And it felt so good.

His guts twist and when his cock gives a brave twitch, he pushes the pillow aside to glare at it. "No," he says because, really, talking to his dick seems like a reasonable next step after what he's done tonight.

Jungkook needs to shower before Taehyung comes back, so it's with jelly legs that he crawls out of bed and stands on his feet. He staggers a bit and kneads at his aching thighs, ignoring the stickiness between his cheeks. He turns around.

He stares at the mess of lube and cum, at how disheveled the bed sheets and pillows are.

Jungkook buries his squeals in the crook of his elbow, feeling oddly proud of himself for doing something perhaps a little crazed and selfish but that has made him feel good and happy.

For the first in his life, he fully and wholeheartedly let go of any inhibitions that had been carved and sawed into his mind. He enjoyed himself, he pleasured himself, his mind had been pleasantly quiet, and most importantly, he fed his greed on his own — even if through a questionable manner.

All in all, Jungkook had a great time and he wisely chooses to, for now, discard what — or rather *who* — brought him to completion, too busy basking in the elation that still thrums through his limbs.

He ponders on what to do for a moment before he walks toward his bedroom's door that he unlocks and opens.

He strains his ears.

Not a single sound can be heard.

"Taehyung?!" Jungkook says, like he hasn't moaned the dragonborn's name earlier and for Heaven's sake. Jungkook really *did* moan and whine his husband's name. "Taehyung! Are you

back?!”

Jungkook waits for two minutes to elapse for good measure.

When no one manifests themselves, he slides on his pajama pants then gathers the soiled bed sheets and pillows to start thoroughly cleaning them in the bathtub.

He tries not to think about Taehyung, or the implications of what he has done that he should be mulling over, and he partially succeeds.

His thoughts do trail back to how he had imagined Taehyung’s hands on him and he rests his forehead against the edge of the tub from where he’s crouched in front of it. “I can’t believe I did this,” he mutters to himself then goes back to his task, conflicting emotions of shame and bliss clashing in him, the latter thankfully overtaking the former.

Once done with everything, and after taking a quick shower to clean himself, Jungkook pours himself a warm bath that he sinks into with a sigh, his muscles pleasantly sore.

Jungkook startles awake, water splashing around.

A door closes downstairs, followed by a voice.

Jungkook sits up straight like a rod.

He left his bedroom’s door wide open wuth the cleaned toy, fleshlight, harness and bottles of lube haphazardly thrown on his mattress.

Jungkook rushes out of the tub.

He doesn’t bother drying himself, instead draping a bathrobe over his shoulders to swing the door open and race inside his bedroom — while also nearly cracking his head open when his foot slides on a smooth tile.

He gathers his belongings that he stashes back inside the paper bag. It’s only after hiding the bag deep in his closet — even if he knows Taehyung or anyone else will not be snooping around — that his sudden panic quells down. He also uses this moment to open his bay windows, the air smelling a little too much like sweat, blueberry and like someone has spent a fun, fulfilling night in here. Then he drops the bathrobe on his bed and rummages through his dresser to grab a new pair of pajama pants, tossing the matching top to instead wear one of Taehyung’s shirts that has found its way in Jungkook’s clothes.

Feeling a lot better now that the evidence of his pastime has been concealed, Jungkook heaves a deep sigh and trudges to his closed door. He freezes on the doorway when he bumps against someone.

His gaze darts up.

It’s Taehyung. Of course it is because Jungkook heard him downstairs but his throat still closes around a strangled noise. “Hi!” Jungkook *exclaims*, the epitome of subtlety.

“Hey?” Taehyung arches a brow. He’s munching on something, his fingers curled around whatever he’s eating.

Jungkook’s treacherous thoughts flicker back to the fantasies he had lost himself into. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here?”

Right. *Right.* “I mean, weren’t you supposed to be back at 3am?”

“It’s 3:39am,” Taehyung says and Jungkook catches the way Taehyung glances at the bracelet Yoongi had made for them that does not lighten in red because the awkward, floundering Jungkook is the real one. “What’s going on with you?”

As far as Jungkook remembers, he started his fun at around midnight, meaning that it somehow lasted from 00am to 3am — although Jungkook had fallen asleep in the tub for God knows how long.

“Why are you still awake?”

‘Oh. Well. I masturbated thinking of you, had the epiphany of a lifetime, and then I proceeded to carelessly fall asleep in the bathtub at the risk of drowning in my sleep because the experience had been that *mind blowing’,* is what Jungkook does not say.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I took a bath.” Which is technically true.

“Are you done in the bathroom?”

“Oh yes. Go ahead.”

“You ate dinner?” Taehyung wonders and turns on his heel to march toward the bathroom.

“I did, yes,” Jungkook says and closes his bedroom door.

“Good,” Taehyung says through a yawn and it’s stupid how giddy Jungkook feels at the sound of this sole word. “I’m gonna shower quickly and then we can head to bed if you’re ready and want to.”

“I am,” Jungkook says and finally moves. “I’ll wait for you in your bedroom?”

“Yeah.”

Less than half an hour later, Jungkook and Taehyung are both settled under the covers. Jungkook is reclined against the headboard and doodling in his botanic book, too restless and full of energy after his impromptu nap.

Taehyung heaves a long, deep sigh as he properly lays down.

“Everything went well?” Jungkook asks, partially because he wants to know but also to distract himself.

“Peachy. It was just a reunion with the squadron. They spotted a hydra not far from here so we’ll probably have to hunt it down since it attacked a village.”

“That sounds fun. The hunting, I mean. Not the attack.”

“It’ll be. Now…" Taehyung starts and Jungkook sees in his peripheral vision the way Taehyung peers up at him, “you’re gonna tell me why you’re acting so skittish?”

“I’m not,” Jungkook says, the words ending in a suspiciously high-pitched note.

“You are. Have I done something wrong?”

“No. Not at all.” *Jungkook did.* “It’s… It’s nothing important. I promise.”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” Jungkook with a small smile as he surveys Taehyung, charmed by the hint of concern he can hear in Taehyung’s voice.

“But?”

Jungkook averts his gaze. He fidgets with his charcoal pencil, scribbling on a corner. “What if I did something that I shouldn’t have done?”

“Did you kill someone?” Taehyung asks with a calm and curiosity not befitting for the countenance of the query.

Jungkook glares at Taehyung. “ *No?* Why is that your first guess!”

“Because you’ve done it before and I wouldn’t put it past you to enjoy killing in a necromancer type of fashion, where you like it because you find it interesting,” Taehyung says, matter-of-fact. “Not in a vile, serial killer kind of way where you'd assassinate innocent people for fun, but more in the sense that you'd definitely enjoy killing those that you'd view as ‘bad’, so to say. You’d find that fascinating. And you’re one hell of a vindictive viper,” he muses, an arm folded under his head. “Did you enjoy killing the guards at the manor?”

Today is proving itself to be challenging for Jungkook’s brain.

First, he does not get the time to process what he’s done in his bedroom tonight, and second he’s also not given a chance to anticipate the twists and turns in the discussion.

“I— Huh.” Jungkook trails off, dizzied by the veer of conversation but also by the contentment that deeply settles in him. Jungkook *does* find death compelling in every way, even those that may be considered disturbing. It’s pleasing to see it be not only accepted in such an open-minded way, but also verbally acknowledged without any disgust or fear.

Jungkook really, *really* wants it all from Taehyung.

“I did,” Jungkook confesses.

“Why?”

“Because they had hurt us, and for once I was the one to cause death. I had always wondered how it feels to take someone’s life, but I've never had a direct, active hand in its cause,” Jungkook quietly says, wondering if he's being too honest. “So it was… It was nice that I got to experience that for the first time, as I had been wanting to.”

“Do you still want to kill? Should I sleep with an eye open?” Taehyung worries with a theatrical shudder.

Jungkook smacks Taehyung’s shoulder. “I don't,” he says then pauses. “But I wouldn't mind doing it again if it's necessary.”

“And you'd enjoy it.”

“It'd depend on who it is that I have to kill, like Dohyun, for example. In that case, I will be very happy,” Jungkook says and continues through a pout. “But don't make it sound like I'm some kind of crazed, bloodthirsty mass murderer.”

“And how would you describe what happened at the manor?”

“That's not compa—”

“A crazed, bloodthirsty mass murder.”

“That was deserved! They had hurt you, and me, and I had to protect us,” Jungkook huffs. “It was still fun, in retrospect,” he playfully adds in spite of his better judgment.

Taehyung bursts into laughter. “Of course it was.”

“You judge me but you enjoyed fighting Seungwon. So you're not a white dove either and I *know* you loved bashing his head.”

“It was heaven,” Taehyung sighs and Jungkook snickers.

“So you understand a bit where I'm coming from.”

“I guess I do.” Taehyung peers at Jungkook. “None of this answers my initial question.”

“I didn’t kill anyone, and I mean it when I say it’s nothing important, but…” Jungkook gnaws on the inside of his cheek. He closes his botany book that he leaves on the nightstand he has made his own, the drawers filled with ink jars, quills, a second comb Taehyung made for him and all sorts of knickknacks belonging to him. He snuffs out the lantern, more comfortable in the darkness that envelops the bedroom. “What I did is pretty bad and immoral. I shouldn’t have done it because it involved someone else. Kind of? But also not because it was just— Just in my head. It’s complicated.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“Forget it,” Jungkook says and lays down on his side, his back to Taehyung.

“Did you hurt someone?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Did you do whatever that thing is with someone else?”

“No,” Jungkook says, hoping that Taehyung does not piece everything together. Thankfully, the dragonborn can sometimes be a bit of an oblivious fool, Jungkook fondly thinks. “I was alone.”

“Why did you do it?”

Jungkook slides his wedding ring down to his first knuckle to roll it around his finger. “Because I wanted to have fun.”

“And did you have fun?”

Jungkook nods but Taehyung can’t see it and so he says “I did. A lot. It felt special because… Because for once I fed my own greed, in some ways. I wanted to be selfish with myself and so I did. I made myself happy.”

“Then everything’s fine,” Taehyung concludes. “I have a feeling that what you’ve done isn’t even bad to begin with. You didn’t hurt anyone and you had fun, who cares about the rest.”

“You say this but if, let’s say, you were the person involved in what I did, you’d probably be bothered by it. Hypothetically. I’m not saying it’s you.”

“Hypothetically, I didn’t bat an eye at you admitting to having wanted to kill, so as you can tell, very few things disturb me,” Taehyung dismisses. “You amused yourself on your own. That’s good. The ‘how’ doesn’t really matter.”

Jungkook tugs the blanket up to his chin and he turns around to face Taehyung. “Do you mean it?”

“Remember what we talked about in the bathroom? About asking yourself if doing certain things makes you happy?” Taehyung asks and Jungkook nods his head. “It’s valid even for things that you may believe to be immoral. It can’t be that bad if you had fun.”

“I just said I enjoyed killing.”

A silence floats in the room.

“Well,” Taehyung starts.

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

“My point still stands,” Taehyung states. “Everything’s fine.”

“Okay.” Jungkook tames down the yearn to scoot closer to Taehyung. “Thank you.”

Taehyung hums. “I’m curious though. What’s all of this about?”

“I am never, ever telling you."

“Means we can sleep then,” Taehyung says with a yawn. “You’re feeling better or do I need to reassure you some more that going on a murderous rampage can sometimes be alright?”

“I’m feeling better. Why are you asking?”

“Because you’re ten miles away.”

Jungkook is barely a couple feet away from Taehyung. “You know—”

“Shut it.”

“—if you want to hug, you can just say so.”

“How about you stop putting words inside my mouth?”

Jungkook muffles his giggles in the blanket.

It’s still with a sliver of hesitation that he shuffles closer to Taehyung. He pauses next to him.

A lull of silence passes.

“I’ll help you bury the bodies?”

“Can you stop!”

“I’m just saying—”

“You’re so annoying,” Jungkook grumbles but he slings an arm over Taehyung’s navel and rests his head above his heart. “Stop it.” Taehyung’s chest shakes beneath Jungkook. “Goodnight,” he says with a temper that is reprimanded by a pinch on his hip.

“Night.”

Jungkook closes his eyes, exhausted and ready to fall asleep now that he’s cradled in Taehyung’s arms.

“Everything’s alright, yeah?”

Jungkook smiles and he drifts higher up the bed to nuzzle his head in Taehyung’s neck. “Yes, it is.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Tae.”

The human brain works in wondrous ways, Jungkook muses.

He has been effectively burying his head in the sand and pretending that the night where he had masturbated thinking of Taehyung and had quite the epiphany never happened. It works, surprisingly, perhaps aided by the fact that he had eventually decided to burn to ashes the soiled pillows and bed sheets in some kind of cleansing ritual.

It’s easier on his sleep like this. Plus it helps him focus back on his study of a certain dragonborn.

A few days after what Jungkook mentally refers to as the Hedonist Blueberry, he finds himself wanting to explore certain inquiries regarding Taehyung. An endeavor he weighs upon himself because he *has to,* and not because he needs to distract himself from the Hedonist Blueberry that won't stop flickering in his mind whenever he enters his bedroom or, God forbid, catches a sight of his beautiful husband painting shirtless in the solarium.

And the thing is, Taehyung hasn't scented Jungkook since that one morning in the tent. Jungkook would love for it to happen again.

So today, Jungkook spends an extra twenty minutes washing his neck when he bathes himself, making sure to completely remove Taehyung's scent from him.

He descends the stairs an hour later, clad in his pajamas. He had thought about stealing one of Taehyung's shirts but it would have impeded tonight's investigation. He glances at Taehyung who's lounging in his armchair and sporting a deep scowl that he sets on Jungkook.

Taehyung goes back to his wood carving and says "Did you clean yourself in a bath of a hundred soap bars?"

"No. Why?" Jungkook says with faux innocence.

"You don't even smell like yourself anymore."

"I just took a nice, hot bath." Jungkook rummages through the kitchen to prepare a meal for Revna who had whined and complained nonstop to Jungkook for a good fifteen minutes then had gone to cuddle with Taehyung while petulantly ignoring Jungkook.

Jungkook fetches some eggs that he begins to boil as he minces some of the griffin meat they've brought home. He hears a moody hiss trailed by some footsteps, then he sees an arm in his peripheral vision that braces against the kitchen counter.

"You did it on purpose, didn't you?" Taehyung asks. "You've been actively avoiding cleaning your neck up till now. What changed?"

Jungkook turns his head and notices that Taehyung is half standing behind him, his other hand in his sweatpants pocket. He doesn't cage Jungkook against the counter, per se, but it's an almost kind of thing. "Did what on purpose?"

Taehyung tilts his head and levels Jungkook with an unamused gaze. Jungkook mirrors him, albeit with more impudence.

"I know you did, Viper."

"I'm not allowed to shower anymore?"

Taehyung's fingers drum on the counter, the nails clicking in a rhythmic cadence. His gaze hardens, darkened by the restless energy that ebbs out of him in waves. " *Jungkook.* "

Anticipation builds inside Jungkook.

He doesn't know what to expect from Taehyung and it's wonderfully exciting.

Will the dragonborn pull Jungkook in or push him away? Will the creature that are Taehyung's instincts bite onto the bait or discard it?

Jungkook turns so that he leans his back against the counter, placing both hands on the edge. Taehyung is barely a foot away from him at this distance and Jungkook can't help but preen under Taehyung's unshakable attention. "I simply showered."

The corner of Taehyung's mouth faintly curls around a derisive smile. "Right. That's why my scent is completely gone from you," Taehyung says, so honest, ruled by his draconic instincts. The dragon within him must be displeased at seeing his handiwork having been washed down the drain.

Taehyung had mentioned in the past that Jungkook's scent is suffused with caramel when Jungkook is really happy.

Jungkook hopes that he's drowning Taehyung in it.

"So?" Jungkook shrugs, feeling teasing and wanting to recklessly poke the angry dragon and see where it'll take him. "We don't have any pretense to keep up in our house. No one is here to judge how my scent is. Aside from you, of course."

Taehyung is quiet for a while and his eyes are searching, darting across Jungkook's face. "What are you testing with this?"

"I'm not exactly testing."

Taehyung scoffs.

"I'm not. I'm trying to understand."

"Understand what?"

"Why your eyes flashed golden several times when you scented me. Why were you irritated when we said goodbye to the hunting group." Jungkook pauses. He ponders on whether he should ask his next question and he throws coyness out of the window to say "Why, and how much would it bother you if I didn't smell like you anymore."

"So you *did* it on purpose," Taehyung concludes.

Jungkook grins. "I may have paid some extra care on cleaning my neck tonight?"

"Fucking brat," Taehyung grumbles and marches away but Jungkook catches the twitch of Taehyung's lips.

Jungkook goes back to his meal preparation, half happy that Taehyung has noticed, half disappointed that he hasn't pushed more.

Once done, Jungkook makes his way toward the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

Jungkook halts. "To bed?"

Taehyung gathers his carving tools and leaves them on the coffee table. He reclines in his armchair and surveys Jungkook. “Come here.”

Jungkook does, although with measured steps. He can’t let Taehyung be aware of his excitement.

“S—” Taehyung squints at Jungkook. “If I tell you to sit, where will you be?”

“On your lap,” Jungkook says without an ounce of shame. It may give him what he wants after all.

“You’re annoying, you know that?”

“Yes, but you’ll still tell me to sit nonetheless, won’t you?”

Taehyung pins Jungkook with an unimpressed look, then he vaguely motions in front of him, defeated. “Then sit.”

This time, Jungkook *does* show his enthusiasm as he swiftly crosses the distance and plops down on Taehyung’s leg before the dragonborn can retract his offer. Taehyung leans forward and takes a whiff of Jungkook’s neck — probably the reason why he even allowed Jungkook on his lap.

Taehyung slumps back. He props his elbows on the armrests and folds his hands together. He stares, sharp yet rendered disorientated by his furrowed brows.

“We don’t have to keep up any pretense here,” Taehyung starts. “We’re in our house.”

“I know."

“Then why the fuck do my instincts bark at me to scent you?” Taehyung snips then emits a curt, frustrated sigh. He clicks his tongue and closes his eyes, head tilting backward against the armchair's backrest. “I shouldn’t have scented you.”

“Why not?” Jungkook asks and it’s not with an upset but rather a curiosity.

“Because now I—” Taehyung sighs again. “This is my dragon’s fault. This wouldn’t happen if I wasn't human.”

Jungkook laughs. “The dragon in you *is* you. Its instincts are yours. It’s not like you’re two different entities.”

“I know what I am, Viper,” Taehyung dismisses a wave. “But I don’t scent people. I never cared about that. I told you.”

“Do you hate that you scented me?”

Taehyung’s knee that Jungkook isn’t occupying jumps up and down. “No.”

“Then everything is fine.”

“Nothing is fine. Why do you keep awakening stuff in me that was never there before?” Taehyung says, and Jungkook wholeheartedly relates to this. “It’s stupid, is what it is. I’m too old for this nonsense.”

“You’re barely 26 years old.”

“Still.”

“Is it that bothersome?”

“It’s confusing. Why is it you?”

“Why not?” Jungkook says. It sounds a little too insecure for his liking.

“Because you’re a viper,” Taehyung says with levity. Jungkook smiles at the way Taehyung softens his timber, probably because he's picked up on the upset that had flickered in Jungkook. “And you’re a brat. And cunning. And too smart for your own good. And you’re seriously such a fucking brat, it’s infuriating.”

“You’re bored when that brat is gone."

Taehyung pauses. “Nevertheless—”

“You know that giving me more compliments won’t kill you, right?”

“Well, you’re beautiful. We’ve established that already.”

Jungkook’s chest and cheeks heat up. “Okay never mind don’t compliment me. I mean, do praise me, but maybe not so bluntly.” Jungkook averts his gaze away from the chuckling dragonborn. “But what is the problem here? I liked when you scented me, and I liked scenting you back even though I’m human.”

Taehyung falls quiet.

Jungkook waits.

And waits some and when nothing happens, he jabs his index finger in Taehyung's arm. “Taehyung.” Jungkook probes harder. “Taehyung.” His hand lightly comes down on Taehyung’s shoulder. “Kim Taehyung.”

Taehyung cracks an eye open.

“Do you remember what I told you the night we came back from Amaris?”

“What about it?”

“I told you that not everything has to be overthought. You can just… Feel. Enjoy things and yourself, including with me. It’s only us two here.”

Taehyung doesn’t reply. Instead he prompts Jungkook to stand, which doesn’t come as much of a surprise to Jungkook.

What takes Jungkook aback a minute later, however, is how after blowing out the lanterns, Taehyung grabs Jungkook’s wrist and tugs him upstairs.

They step inside Taehyung’s bedroom and Taehyung shuts the door behind them. He releases his hold on Jungkook to walk toward the bay windows while Jungkook crawls up on the bed, his confusion heightening the darker the bedroom becomes.

“Can you lay down for me?” Taehyung asks.

Jungkook bites on his tongue to swallow down a stupid reply about how he can do many things for Taehyung when it’s asked so softly. So instead of involuntarily embarrassing himself, Jungkook plops down on the mattress and lays on his side while he watches Taehyung.

A near pitch black envelops the room a minute later, only lightened by the moonlight that seeps through the curtains.

Jungkook feels the bed dip next to him and as his eyes adjust to the darkness, he can trace the vague shapes of Taehyung’s body sitting crossed legs.

Taehyung doesn’t budge for a moment. Neither does Jungkook.

Then, Taehyung speaks, voice barely above a whisper.

“Just… enjoying?”

“Yes. Just enjoying, Taehyung,” Jungkook says and Taehyung moves. “Wait.” Taehyung freezes. “Can you lay down like you had in the tent?”

“Uh?”

“When you were between my legs.”

A lull floats in the bedroom.

“Do you even realize what just came out of your mouth or…”

“I’m just saying,” Jungkook says through pursed lips.

“That position nearly broke my spine in half last time.”

“But I like it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re all that I can see and feel, it’s really nice.”

Taehyung emits a noise of *something.* “You’re way too honest sometimes.”

“Did I fluster you?”

“You’re just too honest.”

“Yes, and I love it,” Jungkook says with a hummed chuckle. “I love that I don’t have to worry about keeping up a filter with you.”

“You certainly don’t,” Taehyung says and lightly pushes on Jungkook’s shoulder.

Jungkook lets himself be laid on his back as he draws a leg up and bends it at the knee, the other extended on the blankets.

Similarly to the morning in the tent, Taehyung shuffles closer to Jungkook and finds his place between Jungkook's legs as he leans over him, hands braced on each side of Jungkook's hips on the bed.

A moment passes where neither of them budge and Jungkook can feel it: the way Taehyung is a second away from withdrawing.

So Jungkook intertwines his fingers at the back of Taehyung's hair, twisting some strands around his fingers. "I'm enjoying myself too. A whole lot," he says, having an inkling that Taehyung may be needing this kind of reassurance.

This is proven true when moments later, Taehyung buries his head in Jungkook's throat with a sigh. Jungkook muffles his laugh against Taehyung's crown when the dragonborn begins to furiously rub his face on Jungkook's neck.

"We need to change our soap," Taehyung mutters then huffs before adding his wrist to the scenting endeavor.

The content itch in Jungkook's chest thrums at the *'We'* and *'Our'*. "Why?"

"Their fragrance is too strong. They conceal your scent too much."

"Okay… We'll change them."

Taehyung hums and carries on with his scenting as he wraps his arms around Jungkook's waist. A shudder blooms on Jungkook's spine, starting from where Taehyung's nose and lips meet the back of his ear. He closes his eyes and he doesn't know how to handle the tenderness that Taehyung unknowingly drowns Jungkook in.

"Elders… Why is it so heady?" Taehyung rasps after a while. "It's like I'm drunk or something, and I don't even drink alcohol."

Jungkook snorts. "Is it okay for you to feel like this?"

"Yeah. S'weird but nice."

"Do you consider your draconic heritage as its own entity?"

"Hm? No? When we refer to our dragon it's rare, and it's more to generalize our instincts and urges."

"If so, *you* want to scent me, and it's not your dragon's fault."

Taehyung stops, having fallen right into Jungkook's trap. "Cunning Viper... Shut it."

Jungkook dissolves into giggles and the bliss that mollifies him comes to a halt when Taehyung straightens up after a few minutes. Taehyung's nose twitches and his eyes retain this golden sheen that Jungkook is rapidly becoming fond of. "Bread?" Jungkook asks because Taehyung seems satisfied with his job, meaning that he'll shuffle away from Jungkook.

Taehyung remains immobile for a bit. His indexes tap where they're curled around Jungkook's hips.

Then he moves.

He extends his legs as he begins to stretch down on his front.

Right above Jungkook.

Taehyung is laying down between Jungkook's legs, not a hair's breadth between their chests. Taehyung's cheek is now pressed over Jungkook's shoulder as his arms envelop Jungkook's waist once more.

"Thank you," Jungkook murmurs, pleasantly kept warm by Taehyung's weight on top of him. Taehyung still says naught but he resumes his scenting that turns more lazy and slow by the minute.

Time elapses, and Taehyung grows heavier above Jungkook, his chest leisurely heaving up and down.

Taehyung is fast asleep.

Jungkook presses a hand against his lips to refrain himself from letting out the horribly gleeful noise that wants to escape his mouth.

Revna slithers inside the bedroom at some point. She joins Taehyung and Jungkook on the bed and Jungkook makes a shushing motion at her.

"Taetae sleeping?"

"He is," Jungkook whispers.

"Can Revna cuddle too?"

"Always, Lovely."

Revna does not need to be told twice. She slides up the bed to curl into a ball in the space under Taehyung's chin and atop Jungkook's chest.

Taehyung jerks awake. "The fuck s'that?"

"It's Revna."

"You're fucking cold, Rev," Taehyung mumbles.

"Taetae is mean."

"M'not."

Jungkook deeply inhales and exhales, sleepiness enveloping him into a cozy somnolence.

"Am I too heavy?" Taehyung wonders and starts to move.

"No. No no. You're not. I like it. I like this. Please," Jungkook rushes and Taehyung falls back down.

Jungkook really does love this: having a warm body so close to his own, the presence soothing his mind. The fact that it's Taehyung is an added bonus that Jungkook wouldn't trade for anything else.

The tenseness that had risen in Taehyung vanishes when he grazes his nose on Jungkook's neck and stays there. He cups Jungkook's nape and he places his wrist against the throat, the thumb beginning to knead circles behind Jungkook's ear. Jungkook's body turns into a pile of warm, gooey mush.

Jungkook combs Taehyung's hair for a while because the strands are too soft to resist the temptation. Plus Taehyung lets it happen, and so Jungkook takes it all, as he desires to.

There's a noise that elevates in the quiet bedroom and disturbs Jungkook's near slumber. It's similar to the one Jungkook had heard in the tent and this time it stays, long enough for Jungkook to know that it isn't a figment of his imagination.

It comes from Taehyung, Jungkook realizes.

It's a staccato, one that is familiar yet uncanny. It's akin to those that have been elicited by Taehyung's temper and ire, however the acuteness is gone here. It's more low-pitched and distant, as if it comes from a deeper place within Taehyung rather than from his throat like it usually does.

The rumble quivers against Jungkook's chest. It grows louder, then quieter, then loud again, in sync with Taehyung's slow breathing.

It abruptly stops.

Taehyung is rigid above Jungkook, his shoulders drawn tight. He yanks himself away from Jungkook as if burnt by fire and he sits on his knees.

Jungkook rises on his elbows, Revna tumbling to the side with an irritated click of her tongue that he ignores. He flicks alight the lantern on the nightstand. The small flames oscillate in the bedroom, illuminating the shock that paint Taehyung's face.

"I—" Taehyung presses a hand over his chest. "Uh," he breathes out and rubs his palm between his pecs.

"What— That was… uncommon, right? And that was you?"

Taehyung nods as he rapidly blinks.

"Have you ever made this sound?"

Taehyung shakes his head. "I don't even know what— What the fuck that was."

"Did you *purr?"*

"*Hah?!"*

"It kinda sounded like that!"

"Dragonborns don't purr! I'm not a damn cat!"

"Well you hissed at me before. So." Jungkook shrugs then squeaks when lightning zaps his forehead.

"It wasn't a purr. Humans or dragonborns don't have the anatomy to do this."

“Then where did it come from?”

“It was…” Taehyung touches his chest again, a lost look knitting his brows. “It came from my breath pouch.”

Jungkook properly sits, his legs draped over Taehyung’s. “Your breath pouch?”

Taehyung nods. “You know how I see my breath as a roulette with seven segments and one or two arrows?” He says and Jungkook confirms . “When I go through the breaths in my pouch, it makes a sound sometimes.”

“A staccato.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve heard it quite a few times, usually before you’d fight someone,” Jungkook quips and Taehyung’s tight stance unwinds a bit. “But it wasn’t the same here. It sounded different.”

The common staccato happens, different from the earlier rumble as Taehyung’s hand drifts below his collarbones.

“It’s not the same,” Jungkook says, voice as hushed as Taehyung’s is.

“I don’t… I don’t get it.”

Jungkook’s hand joins Taehyung’s, their pinkies bumping together. “It’s where the breath pouch is, no?” He says and Taehyung holds onto the back of Jungkook’s fingers to bring them a little higher on his chest. “Does it feel different? The usual staccato from the rumble?”

“It does,” Taehyung says and his confusion visibly lessens at the question.

“How different was the rumble?”

“It felt as though my chaos was… pacified. It never— It never happened before. It’s always writhing, ready to implode on its own or because I forced it. My breaths tend to feel like separate entities that sometimes clash against each other, and it’s why I came up with the roulette idea to help me control them, but right now…” Taehyung pauses and tilts his head, his gaze cast low. His hand still clasped around Jungkook’s tightens. “My chaos and breaths feel like— Like they've melted with each other. I don’t know how to explain.”

“You don’t have to explain.” Jungkook frees his wrist and falls on his back. Taehyung cards a hand through his hair and it lowers to cover his mouth as he pensively peers at Jungkook. “Taehyung." He grabs Taehyung’s arms then gently pulls on them in a mute request that Taehyung complies to.

The two of them find themselves in their previous position, with Taehyung settled between Jungkook’s legs, his head resting above Jungkook’s chest. Revna is gone from the bed and sleeping in the round, large cushion Hoseok had bought for her not too long ago.

Jungkook hesitates at first, but he eventually decides to try.

He plays with Taehyung’s hair with one hand, careful with his nails that he lightly scratches on the scalp. Taehyung must like it because the tenseness in his shoulders dissipates as he becomes heavier atop Jungkook.

When the rumble happens once more, neither of them address it.

Taehyung does briefly freeze but he relaxes when Jungkook uses both of his hands to lazily comb through the strands.

“It’s like I’m the peace to your storm,” Jungkook tentatively murmurs.

“I thought something similar some time ago.”

“Really?”

“I think…” Taehyung trails off.

Nothing is said for a moment.

Jungkook waits, patient.

“I think my chaos is finding peace in you.”

Jungkook is at the Kim house, enjoying lunch with everyone else in preparation for their departure the next day for Kaiya. Elder Miseon had dropped by at Vanae earlier this morning confirming that everything had been finalized for the visit to the, quite literally, bloody forest.

Jungkook is impatient, vibrating with barely contained excitement that heightens whenever he catches the same anticipation bubbling in Taehyung.

Jungkook had expected himself to feel awkward around Taehyung after the Hedonist Blueberry, however what sliver of guilt he had felt had rapidly vanished after Taehyung’s reassurance a few nights ago. Jungkook had also had a little more fun in the shower last night — nothing grandiose like what he had done in his bedroom —, and it had felt just as nice, albeit much shorter yet fulfilling.

“You smell fruity,” Taehyung says and leans toward Jungkook. “It’s faint but…”

“Fruity?” Jungkook repeats.

Fruity.

Blueberry.

The blueberry flavored and scented lube.

Oh my God.

“Makes me want to eat blueberries,” Taehyung muses and peers at his father. “Do we have some?”

“I can make us a fruit salad if you would like, my son,” Junhyun says as Taehyung approaches him.

Jungkook's head darts toward Jimin and he must connect Taehyung's remark to their visit at the exotic shop because he pinches his mouth into a thin line, his lips shaking around a horribly repressed smile.

Jungkook marches toward Jimin to grip his arm and pull him away from the group. "He smelled the lube on me!" Jungkook whisper-yells while Jimin muffles his laughter in his palm. "This is mortifying. Oh my God. I'm never masturbating again. And I took a bath? How did he smell it? Do you think he knows what I've done?"

Jimin bursts into a cackle that would rival those of a hyena. Jungkook smacks Jimin's arm. "Elders," Jimin says and wipes at a tear. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of that and you were adamant about getting the blueberry one. But that means you had your fun then?" He says with a suggestive wiggle of his brow.

Jungkook's face warms up. He nods. "It was really nice… It was new and it was just—" He peers at Taehyung then back at Jimin. "I never really do things for myself, or pleasure myself like this very often, you know? So it felt really good."

"I'm glad," Jimin grins. "Sex *can* be a lot of fun even on your own, especially when you get to experiment new things."

Yeah.

Jungkook has certainly experimented.

"I thought of Taehyung."

Jimin blinks. "What?"

"While… You know. The first time. I swear I didn't mean to. It sort of just happened out of its own volition and maybe it was because of the blueberry lube and the scented candles that smelled like smoke and reminded me of Taehyung's scent because you know he— And yes. And then… Then I did it. And I thought of him. And I couldn't stop," Jungkook says, his words jumbling together and becoming intelligible when he presses his palms over his face. "I couldn't stop thinking about his hands and his mouth and—"

"Alright, alright. Don't get all descriptive on me with that," Jimin grimaces and loops an arm around Jungkook's to walk them toward the large table that has been brought outside.

"I'm sorry," Jungkook says and sits down on a chair, Jimin on his right. "This is probably weird for you."

"It's unusual for sure, but you can talk to me about it, don't worry," Jimin says with a smile. "So. You thought of him. Did it feel nice to do so?"

Jungkook bobs his head in agreement. "My thoughts kept going back to Taehyung's touches and to that moment where he scented me in the tent. Then my mind spiraled down that well. It's so immoral."

"It's really not, Jungkook. Taehyung is your husband. You're close to him in many ways, you clearly find him handsome and even attractive. Attraction for someone can become sexual, and there's nothing wrong with that."

“I suppose.”

“Plus, between us, if Taehyung was to know what you did,” Jimin starts, “I highly doubt that he’d be repulsed, weirded out or anything like that.”

Jungkook peers at Jimin. “You don’t think so? I told him that I did something that was quite immoral, and he assured me that it was fine, but he’s still unaware of what I really did.”

“I think he’d be curious and wonder why,” Jimin snickers. “Taehyung is very curious about you,” Jimin says and Jungkook smiles to himself. It’s oddly comforting to hear this from perhaps the one person that knows Taehyung better than anyone else. “And I’m honestly surprised you’re starting to dabble in sex only now considering how… Well. Starved you are, even more for Taehyung’s affection.”

“Is it obvious that I am?”

“Very, very, very much so.”

Jungkook huffs. “It’s not like Taehyung is rejecting me. So I can be hungry.”

“And it’s not like Taehyung dislikes it either. Taehyung rarely does things he doesn’t want to do. He’s a spoiled child. He’s not the tactile type at all, yet he is with you, I wonder why," Jimin says with a teasing smile.”

Jungkook slouches over the table. “I crave his touch so much, it’s stupid. I want to be close to him in every way, physically too. Whenever he touches me I want more, and I’m not talking about sex. It was never about that. It still isn’t.”

“Tell him this and see what he’ll do.”

“I can’t tell him.”

“Tell who what?” Hoseok wonders as he plops down on the other side of the table. Taehyung settles on Jungkook’s left and deposits a pile of plates at the center. “I want to know.”

“It’s nothing that concerns you, nosy ass,” Jimin retorts.

“Rich coming from you,” Hoseok scoffs and begins to bicker with Jimin.

Taehyung’s parents along with Seokjin, Namjoon and Yoongi all install themselves at the table, armed with a plethora of food. Revna also has her own spot next to Taehyung where she’s draped over a high chair with a wooden bowl attached on the seat, the contraption one that Taehyung has built for her.

Jungkook crosses his arms on the table and he lowers his head in the cocoon they make, partially hidden now. He turns his head to the left and peers up, his gaze meeting Taehyung’s.

“What?”

Jungkook makes a little beckoning motion that Taehyung responds to by leaning closer to him.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t scent me for the past days,” Jungkook whispers.

“I never said I’d do it every day.”

“But you did it twice already,” Jungkook counters through pursed lips. “So the pact is made.”

“When did I shake upon this pact?”

“When you were sulking because I wasn’t smelling like you anymore."

Taehyung rolls his eyes.

“You didn’t scent me.”

“I—” Taehyung’s gaze darts around, loud discussions erupting at the dining table. “Not now.”

“But later? At our house?” Jungkook asks, hopeful. Taehyung stares at him for a moment then he nods, and Jungkook emits a happy chuckle. “Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung says and straightens up, still slightly turned sideways toward Jungkook.

“Tae,” Jungkook starts again. “Is it okay if I get a little greedier?”

“Greedy with what?”

“You.”

Taehyung looks down at Jungkook. “It is.”

“Do you like it when I’m greedy?”

Taehyung does not reply right away, glancing around and drumming his fingers on the table. “I don’t hate or dislike it.”

“I see,” Jungkook chuckles.

Jungkook averts his gaze to survey his hand that is sprawled on the table between his crossed arms. His right arm shuffles so that it squeezes under the left one. It inches farther and bumps against Taehyung’s hand. Jungkook traps Taehyung’s middle finger between his own to tug the limb toward him, up until it passes under his arm and then finds its place in the crook of Jungkook’s arms.

Jungkook intertwines his and Taehyung’s fingers together, the pad of thumb rubbing over the back of Taehyung’s. His lids fall shut.

When he opens his eyes some time later and glances up, Taehyung is still peering at him, and his gaze is akin to the one he had pinned Jungkook with at Amaris’ library.

Jungkook wonders if Taehyung is finding him beautiful again, if he’ll say it out loud or not.

Jungkook curls into himself to better hide his face and what he’s doing. He pulls Taehyung’s hand farther into the cocoon of his crossed arms, up until it’s an inch away from his face. His and Taehyung’s gaze lock together.

Taehyung is the one to break it when he peers down at where his arm is trapped under Jungkook's. His hand slides closer to Jungkook's face, the motion tentative. His index raises to tap Jungkook's chin then it drifts higher and boops Jungkook's nose.

Jungkook emits an airy laugh and Taehyung smiles but he doesn't appear to notice it, the curve small, more of an echo to Jungkook's happiness.

The curl of Taehyung's mouth disappears when his hand shuffles in the little space under Jungkook's head to ever so slowly cup Jungkook's cheek, the thumb resting on the apple and beneath the lower lid in a feather-light touch. Taehyung's fingertips caress down Jungkook's cheek until his thumb is placed against the corner of Jungkook's mouth.

Emboldened by the tenderness that Taehyung displays, Jungkook twists his head a bit, just enough for the thumb to brush upon his lips, allowing Jungkook to press a cheeky kiss on the pulp.

Taehyung emits an amused huff and Jungkook makes a soft noise that is a half chuckle, half content sigh.

Taehyung looks entranced by Jungkook, and for once, Jungkook's certainty isn't disturbed by a *'It's probably just in his head'* that would usually shut down his speculation.

Taehyung's hand moves to fiddle with the row of golden earrings adorning Jungkook's ear. Jungkook closes his eyes when the palm cradles his face once more seconds later. The wedding ring is cold against his skin, a contrast to how warm Taehyung is.

Jungkook nuzzles the inner side of Taehyung's wrist and he feels so *pliant*, as though his body has turned into a cotton that becomes more fuzzy and malleable at every touch from the dragonborn.

Jungkook feels a little teasing, and so when Taehyung's hand cradles the side of his throat, he discreetly tilts his head back without leaving the privacy of his cocoon, just enough to give the subtle hint that he's purposefully baring his neck.

Like in the tent, the reaction is instantaneous, and a veil of gold oscillates in Taehyung's irises.

A particularly loud laughter shatters the bubble that had been wrapped around Jungkook and Taehyung.

Taehyung startles. He rapidly blinks, his eyes back to their original color. He peers around and he retracts his hand to recline in his chair and fold his arms over his chest.

Jungkook notes the tenseness that has risen in Taehyung's shoulders but he discards it in favor of tracing the shapes of Taehyung's face with his gaze. He halts at the lips, wondering how it would feel if Taehyung's affection translated into kisses that he'd press on Jungkook's nape, on his back and neck.

His lips.

"Let us eat," Dahee says. "We will have a long day tomorrow. Today we must also visit Vanae's market to prepare."

"So it's settled for sure now?" Hoseok asks. "We're going to Kaiya?"

“Yes,” Dahee confirms. “Not all of us have to join, however those who would like are more than welcomed to.”

“As if we’d miss the opportunity of potentially dying after visiting that bloody forest.”

“Don’t jinx us, Jimin,” Hoseok tuts.

The plates are distributed across the table. Jungkook doesn’t bother taking one for himself. Taehyung is handling it for him, after all, already piling food in a plate that he hands to Jungkook minutes later. Jungkook takes it with a hushed *‘Thank you’* and a smile.

Everyone eats and discusses together in merry chatter for the next hour and a half.

Revna intervenes a few times as well but she falls quiet when she curls around Taehyung’s shoulders, her head on his crown as she naps there. Meanwhile Jungkook leans against Taehyung, soon resting his head above Taehyung’s shoulder.

Jungkook worries that he and Revna might be too clingy, but Taehyung never pushes them away, instead continuing his argument with Jimin and Seokjin.

The group decides to walk to Vanae’s market rather than fly there, wanting to enjoy the sunny day.

Jungkook is walking farther at the head of the group to lead everyone to the market after Taehyung had challenged him to do so with a *‘Pff. There’s no shot you can find your way there’*.

“Remember that it is an important trip, my son,” Dahee says to Taehyung.

“I know?”

“You will have to be respectful of your environment and keep at bay your childlike excitement while inside Kaiya’s forest,” Dahee carries on. “Most particularly, you must not touch anything there.”

“I’m not a child, Mom."

“You certainly become one whenever you discover something uncanny or related to the Arcanes. Kaiya is both.”

“How often have you gotten into trouble for doing something forbidden?” Jimin pipes in.

Jungkook snickers when he looks behind his shoulder and sees the disgruntled look knitting Taehyung’s face.

“Once or twice,” Taehyung shrugs.

“Once or twice every hour, that is true,” Junhyun nods.

“Yeah, alright, I don’t appreciate the coalition that is forming against me right now,” Taehyung glowers.

Jungkook swivels on his feet to walk backwards and survey Taehyung. “Will we have to keep an eye on you to make sure you don’t accidentally provoke Kaiya’s guardian?” Jungkook shouts to be heard by Taehyung.

“You should watch where you’re walking before you trip,” Taehyung shouts back. “Again.”

“I’m fine,” Jungkook says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I know you’ll catc—”

Jungkook steps back and his equilibrium shifts in its axes when his right foot passes through air. He expects to feel the ground underneath the sole of his shoe at some point because he probably just missed a dip in the soil and is about to embarrassingly fall on his rear.

However only void meets Jungkook’s shoe for what feels like forever.

Jungkook begins to topple backward. One of his arms reflexively extends to grab onto something — *anything.*

This is when he sees them, moving past him at an alarming pace: the wooden edges of a doorway.

Fear immediately ruptures through Jungkook.

He still tries to grip the door’s frame.

His fingers slip past it.

It all happens too fast for anyone to react in time, even more because Jungkook is feet away from the group. Yet, contradictorily, everything begins to slow down around Jungkook.

He peers at Taehyung whose smile vanishes from his face while his eyes widen. Taehyung stretches an arm toward Jungkook as he lunges forward. Jungkook feels an invisible hand grab the front of his shirt. Most likely Taehyung’s wind. It pulls. Jungkook hears his name being yelled. He catches in the corner of his eyes an ink raven that bursts out of Yoongi’s palm and flies toward Jungkook.

It’s too late, however.

The wooden door slams shut in a splash of ink that splatters across Jungkook’s face.

A blue expense replaces the green one of tree leaves above Jungkook. The wind whistles around him, billowing louder as the gust rustles his clothes and hair.

Jungkook falls.

Taehyung does not catch him this time.

Jimin tumbles forward and crashes against Taehyung when they both reach the spot where the door had once been.

Jimin springs to his feet, his gaze snapping around then falling on Taehyung.

Taehyung’s head darts up from where he’s kneeling a knee, his eyes riveted on the place where Jungkook has disappeared.

“The tracker!” Several people yell at once.

A flurry of ink erupts in the forest. Jimin strides toward Yoongi who pulls out a sundial.

“Fuck.” The triangular centerpiece of the sundial does not move, and not a single shadow can be seen on its surface. “It’s— It’s not showing me anything. Fuck!”

“What was the fucking point of wearing those damn bracelets if they don’t work?!” Jimin says and immediately regrets it because it’s unfair. Yoongi’s childhood friend is gone. It isn’t the warlock’s fault, but fear and anger squeezes Jimin’s throat.

“I’m not a God, Jimin! My arcane may be versatile but that is its downside: it’s good at many things, but it excels at none,” Yoongi spits then throws the sundial on the ground. “Fuck. Fucking shit.”

“We should go to Hyuna,” Hoseok says. “She can help us.”

“Could it be Seungwon?”

“Or Dohyun. Fuck this is— This is bad.” Namjoon shakily exhales. “If Dohyun has Jungkook—”

“We can still find Jungkook with the bracelet. Or maybe through his and Revna’s bond, somehow?”

“We need to…”

Jimin tunes out the tense conversation that erupts to turn around and watch Taehyung.

Taehyung hasn’t moved.

He doesn’t seem to be hearing or seeing anything. His gaze is distant, not a single blink tearing through his stupor. Then he rises up and he must know that it’s pointless, that Jungkook is gone Elders know where, but he still shifts to his dragon self to fly off.

Taehyung scouts the area, vanishing from Jimin’s view for a moment before landing on ground minutes later.

The stunned look on Taehyung’s face hasn’t left him. Jimin imagines that Taehyung is reviewing everything: the door’s sudden appearance, Jungkook falling through it, everyone trying to reach for him yet failing.

Taehyung’s scent is bitter, oozing out of him in pulsating waves so acrid that it drowns the air and suffocates everything in it.

Dahee walks toward Taehyung. She cautiously touches his shoulder and when Taehyung still remains unresponsive, she cups his face with a hand. “We will find him, my son. I promise you.”

Taehyung does not speak a word. He pushes Dahee’s hands away from him as he steps backward. His cold gaze is set low ahead of him as he lifts a hand to his throat then to his mouth.

A staccato resounds through the ambient stillness in an incessant, irregular rhythm. It’s low-pitched, booming through the forest and prompting flocks of birds to vacate the area.

Taehyung probably does not even notice it, the way lightning begins to crackle around him and strike through the forest, amidst the trees and high up in the sky. It coils and erratically snaps in every direction, then coalesces with his wind that is hot when it reaches Jimin's face.

The arcane that seeps out of Taehyung's body is one that Jimin has never experienced in the past.

It's potent. *Pungent*, to a point where it forces Jimin to cover his nose and mouth. It suffuses his senses with petrichor, blazing embers and the stench of a metallic aftertaste.

Thunder rumbles.

Jimin tilts his head up.

The sun is concealed by dark, gray clouds that soon obscure the forest in their shadows. A drop falls on Jimin's face, then a second, a third. The rain is heavy as it pours over the area in a deafening deluge.

Jimin has been scared *for* Taehyung in the past: when Taehyung had been taken away, when he had defied the Council, or when his draconic heritage had been confirmed. When their peers would fear Taehyung, Jimin would remain by his side, unafraid and uncaring of Taehyung's temper he would be amused by.

Jimin has never *once* been scared of Taehyung, yet a shudder creeps up his spine.

His skin pebbles, his hair raising at the back of his head.

His instincts bark at him to flee the scene and they're loud enough for him to take an unconscious step back he only realizes seconds later.

He glances around and he notices that the same wariness spreads across the rest of the group. Hoseok and Seokjin are immobile but Jimin catches the twitches in their hands or the way their eyes shift to those of their dragon counterpart. Yoongi has a large raven ink standing behind him. Guarding him.

Then, there's Taehyung's parents: with Junhyun who has an arm extended in front of Namjoon as he frowns, and Dahee whose face is smoothed into a cautious impassiveness.

Jimin expects to see Taehyung's arcane blast outward and raze all on its path. It's what would commonly happen. It's what is *expected.*

Yet, none of that occurs.

Taehyung's arcane withdraws within him and dissipates. And it is what scares Jimin the most.

How eerily calm Taehyung looks.

Is.

There is still a thirst that colors Taehyung's eyes.

People dread the anarchy chaos dragons can unleash on others, however Jimin believes what should be feared is their disciplined destruction: one that would be unwavering rather than unstable, one

that would be ever-lasting rather than short-lived, and one that would be personal, have its path carved through blood rather than ashes.

Today rings like a warning in Jimin's mind.

A reminder that no matter how kind and caring Taehyung is, he still remains a chaos dragon.

"Taehyung," Dahee tentatively starts, loud enough to be heard over the downpour.

"The tracker," Taehyung says, voice hoarse.

"It can't locate Jungkook," Yoongi answers.

"Do we have any tangible way of finding out where he is at the moment?" Taehyung carries on, his gaze drifting on Yoongi.

"No. However—"

"How do we know if he's alive?" Taehyung interrupts.

"The ring, no?" Hoseok says. "It— He can use it, and we'll feel the pinch."

"With some luck," Yoongi resumes, "where he's held is simply hidden by runes rather than it being a place that nullifies arcane completely."

"Right…" Taehyung looks at the sky. " *Luck.* "

Jimin tenses when he hears a rustle of leaves. He watches how Revna slithers toward Taehyung. She makes little noises and clicks of her tongue, all sounding disheartened, like cries.

"Revna." Taehyung crouches down. "Can you feel him in the bond?" Revna makes a sound that Taehyung must understand because he nods. "Good." She stretches her head toward his open palm to rest her chin on it.

Taehyung shifts to his dragon self, Revna secured in his talon.

Jimin shields himself with an arm when Taehyung's wings that bat up and down lift leaves and soil, sending gusts of rain that whip across Jimin's face.

Taehyung flies off, seemingly making his way toward Minsoo's lair.

When Taehyung is gone, Jimin falls on his rear in the wet soil and releases the breath he had been holding. Hoseok plops down on the ground too.

"Fuck." Jimin rubs a trembling hand on his forehead.

"Will he be a danger to either of us?" Yoongi asks and Jimin peers at him. Like everyone here in the vicinity, his hair is drenched, his clothes soaked with rain sticking to his form.

"We should contact Hyuna and any other warlock either of us knows," Dahee says. "We—"

"Dahee," Yoongi snips and crosses the distance to halt in front of her. "Will your son be a danger to us? Yes or no?"

Dahee exhales through her nose. “He will do everything in his power to find Jungkook, regardless of the costs."

Jungkook is still falling, which is an odd sensation.

He tries to turn around but it’s difficult with the force of the wind whistling in his ears. He manages to twist his head at least, right in time to see the vast pool of water approaching him.

He doesn’t get to readjust his position to soften the fall before his side collides with the water, then with something rough and hard. Air is punched out of him, his lungs emptying and he can feel something snap somewhere inside his chest.

The water is glacial. The torrent is untamed and throws Jungkook against sharp rocks that nip at his skin.

His head hits another rigid surface.

His vision clouded by the water speckles with white dots.

The rigid surface moves, somehow. It shuffles beneath Jungkook and lifts him above the surface.

Jungkook gasps for air when he’s out, his lungs burning. He winces when his cough rattle through him and pulls at the pain in his side. Jungkook thinks he’s on some kind of round platform that easily drifts through the river. It soon lands on shore.

Jungkook glances around as he pants.

A forest surrounds him, different from Vanae’s.

He tilts his head back. The world is upside down but he can see at the end of a long path some kind of small house.

It doesn’t take long for Jungkook to piece everything together: the arcanic door, the rock-like formation under him, the large runes that litter the ground. The familiar carrying him smells putrid and bleak and Jungkook’s nose would wrinkle if he wasn’t used to such scents.

Jungkook presses a hand against his ribs. He hopes none of them have completely broken.

He hears some footsteps echoing near him. His vision darkens and blurs more and more. His consciousness recedes.

A body comes into view, then a head and a smile.

A chirpy voice speaks.

“Hi!”

"Yumi," Jungkook croaks out. "I take it Dohyun is here as well?"

Yumi grins. "Not this time. I've been meaning to talk to you alone, Jungkook. I believe we have a common goal, and perhaps a common enemy."

Chapter End Notes

Greetings, I'm back, and so is SLB and my essays in the notes, sorry 🥸

I could have cut this chap in half but I reaaally didn't want to, so you're having all of it at once I'm sorry 😭

But hello everyone it's been a while T____T I took a break from both Twitter and writing that may have gotten much longer than what I realized (time is fiction), and then I decided to write this monstrous chapter that took me a whiiiile to finish so here I am, two months later XDDDD

I at least did not come back empty-handed 😌 We've got some progress from both sides and some of you may have been surprised by the presence of ✨spices✨ this chap 👁️👄👁️ but it makes for koo's character that is very touch driven and in tune with his physicality hehe (and my boy needed to have his fun for once 👍)

I hope you enjoyed this chapter thoughT____T I'm very nervous to post it because it's been a while since I've seen y'all but I definitely had a blast writing it and I hope y'all had a good time reading it as well 🥹🤍

Please don't hesitate to leave some comments as always they feed me, keep me alive and are the most motivating thing in the world 🤲🤍 Thank you so much for reading this monstrous chapter if you have and thank you for sticking with me and being so patient and sweet it means a lot :(Forehead kisses to y'all 🤍

❧ Twitter

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Taekook art of the scenting scene made by bbuntokki

❧ Art of the Hedonist Blueberry 🔞 made by artsi_sss!! This is made in collaboration with my dear and beloved Sisi who dedicated the month of June to SLB, this is the 2nd part of the collab, the link to the first part is at the end of CH21 🤲🤍

❧ Art of Jungkook (feat tiny vmin XD) made by thvscunnie

❧ Book cover for SLB made by sugarykv

❧ Video edit of Jungkook made by july_fairy02

Chapter 23: A Dragon's Heartbreak I

Chapter Summary

> Taehyung’s peace is gone. Meanwhile, Jungkook learns more than he could have ever imagined.

Chapter Notes

> !!Please read!! Technically chapter 23 and 24 were supposed to be one big chapter 23, but Ao3 wouldn't let me post it so I had to cut in half and post into two chapters 😭
>
> Enjoy this mini fic of a double chapter XD🤍
>
> (kinda) Song recommendations:
>
> 1) Emotional sad playlists that you can put on for most of chapter 23: playlist 1, playlist 2, playlist 3
> 2) For the scenes with Yumi: playlist (<- idk why I kept putting this playlist on but it just felt fitting XDD), song
>
> **Cw:**
>
> **1) a few instances blood**
> **2) tiny bits of violence**
> **3) a few very very brief gruesome parts (but nothing too too graphic)**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The people of Vanae are accustomed to all sorts of atmospheric conditions. It's partly due to where the country is situated in the continent of Aurora, but also provoked by the prolific arcane that is deeply fused with the land.

They have experienced cyclones, monsoons, dense fogs, and a plethora of other types of climate changes. Very little weather can phase Vanae’s people. Their houses are even built to withstand all kinds of catastrophes, such as the earthquakes that occur every few months.

Today, a storm is brewing high up.

It prompts merchants at the markets, hunters in the forest, or simple people in their home to come outside and look up. The storm isn’t like any other they have experienced before. This one is suffused with an arcane that drapes over the land in a heavy, stifling veil.

The people look at each other. Concern rises in them because they know what the core of the storm is. *Who,* it is.

An event must have occurred, grievous enough to paint the sky in darkening clouds.

Some dragons fly up to have a better view of the growing storm. It stretches over the horizon, seeming endless, and some wonder if it perhaps covers the entirety of Vanae's land no matter how vast the country is.

A sorrow falls from the storm as rain pours over Vanae. The anguish is potent and heavy in the air, submerging the fury of the lightning with more clouds, one that the dragonborns can sense.

Insung, a member of Taehyung's hunting squad, is one of them.

He has known Taehyung for years. He's familiar with Taehyung's heritage and arcane, however even someone unaccustomed to it could easily read through the blend of natural and arcanic storm.

As Insung surveys the gray sky, he knows.

He calls off the hunt he was meant to lead today. What accident — or worse — that has gone down is dire and must be related to Jungkook. Insung simply hopes the storm can be appeased.

Taehyung lands on the platform surveying the inside of Minsoo's lair.

He shifts to human self and it's mechanical when his wings spring out to carry him down.

Revna slithers away from him to curl into a ball on a table, her distressed sounds echoing between his ears.

"What ha—"

"Jungkook's gone." Taehyung sits down on a chair to find some semblance of anchor. His arcane is erratically lashing in his breath pouch and in the sky he tries to withdraw it from yet fails to. It has to be let out in some ways, lest it sunders through him and snaps what sliver of rationale he has left.

"Gone?"

"Taken. He's gone."

"Dead?"

Taehyung's heart stops at the question.

Jungkook could be dead.

"What about the basilisk? She wants to say something."

Taehyung's gaze darts on Revna. She hisses and makes clicks of her tongue then nudges her head against Taehyung's hand that is limply laid on the table. When he does not budge, she grabs a quill that she holds in her mouth to carve a letter on the wooden surface.

A *'J'*.

"Jungkook?"

Revna nods and drops the quill.

Taehyung hesitates to ask his next question. He considers not uttering it because he does not know if he can handle its answer. He does anyway.

"You can't feel him in the bond anymore?"

Revna nods.

"At all?" Taehyung's voice breaks on the last word.

Revna makes a noise that reads like a cry. Black tears fall from her eyes.

Blood roars between Taehyung's ears. His breath picks up as he leans forward on his elbows and wraps his hands behind his head. A numbness churns in him, its edges gnawed at by the fury that has relented for a fleeting moment.

Jungkook is dead.

Jungkook just die—

"He's not dead."

"She can't feel him in the bond anymore," Taehyung says, his words more of a murmur because of the lump that suffocates him. "She can't."

"Could be some runes. They can hide that shit easily like they had with you. The bond is probably still here."

It makes sense. It's a possibility. But Taehyung's mind can't wrap around it when it's drowned by the fact that Jungkook may have been killed because Taehyung failed him.

"What exactly happened?"

"Yumi. A door opened and then— Then he fell through it and—"

"He'll catch me."

"You'll catch me, right?"

"I'm fine. I know you'll catc —"

“I didn’t catch him. *I didn’t catch him.* I tried to catch him and I didn’t. He was *right there* and I didn’t catch him." The guilt and remorse are virulent, tearing air out of his lungs and it hurts — *it hurts so much.*

“We’ll fucking find him.”

“How?!”

Revna startles when the chair clatters on the ground.

“You’ve got some trackers in—”

“They don’t work! He’s gone!”

“Find something else.”

“And how the fuck am I supposed to do that?! My arcane is useless!” Taehyung shouts to his grandfather and it reads like a plea because why is he so *powerless?*

“You’ve got that ink warlock. Or Hyuna.”

Taehyung emits a mirthless, choked laugh that sounds manic to his own ears.

A part of him has been torn apart, he realizes yet does not understand.

It has left him exposed like a raw nerve and he wonders if this is what hysteria feels like. A conscious, complete loss of oneself. A whirlwind of unbridled emotions that clash together: fury, grief, a thirst to rip it all asunder and so much pain that Taehyung doesn’t know how to breathe around it or make it stop.

“If a tracker can’t help us,” Taehyung starts and something trickles between his balled up fingers, “how else are we supposed to find him? He’s *gone.* I didn’t catch him. He could be with the man with the scent and do you have any *idea* of what he’d do to him because of me? I didn’t catch Jungkook and he may have taken his last breath when he fell through that door. I didn’t and I’m— I don't know what to do.”

“Whoever took Jungkook won't be stupid enough to kill him when they can use him as leverage against you,” Minsoo rationalizes but Taehyung can’t hear it.

Taehyung paces around. “I don’t know what to do.” The wrath flickers alive once more, dizzying when it smolders through his veins. “I’m gonna do something stupid and the others are too scared of me to help me or—” His teeth click shut. The bitter scent of the fear that had bled from his family is still fresh in Taehyung’s senses.

“Breathe, kid.”

“He’s gone.”

“You speak like he’s dead when—”

“Revna can’t feel him anymore!”

“And?”

“He vanished and I couldn’t catch him the one time it mattered the most! I don’t even know if he’s alive or not! He could be dead right now! He—” Taehyung presses the back of a hand against his mouth.

The thunder booms outside, resounding through the lair’s tunnel.

Taehyung drops on a chair and hunches forward as he blankly stares down. He watches the drops of blood trickle from his hands and splatter across the floor. A palm roughly smacks the back of his head as a warmth follows it and flows through Taehyung.

Air passes through his lungs.

“We’ll find him.”

One of Taehyung's shaking hands grips onto the wrist of the other. His bones wince under the bruising grip.

He feels a little dizzy, like he can sometimes when he’s on the verge of a fright attack, and it's worsened by something mad and desperate that slithers through his very soul. He contains it. He's not sure how, but he manages to, aided by Minsoo's warming hand on his shoulder.

Taehyung doesn’t remember ever being hit by such a crushing sense of hopelessness.

He thinks back on last night, on how he had scented Jungkook and allowed himself to bask into this newfound peace only for it to be snatched away from him. Taehyung wanted to scent Jungkook again today. He had longed to give his dragon a fare that it — *they* — had never known they wanted.

Taehyung doesn’t know if he’ll be able to do so anymore. If he’ll get the chance to feed Jungkook as much as Jungkook feeds him. If he’ll ever see Jungkook alive and well again. Taehyung doesn't know if he'll ever be able to properly breathe again.

"It'll be alright, kid. You need to breathe."

Taehyung focuses on the hand that ruffles his hair. It helps with the anger, but it does nothing to mitigate the way everything in him is mourning someone that he doesn’t know to have lost yet.

It’s overwhelming.

It’s the urge to cry but the inability to do so. It’s the sky that rains for Taehyung as the storm outside echoes the one in him.

Taehyung’s trembling lips press together.

“How’s your arcane?”

“M’fine.”

Taehyung has to restrain his arcane by contradictorily allowing it to howl high in the sky.

Taehyung glances at his grandfather who flicks the cap of a vial and downs its content in one gulp. Another kind of guilt pangs within Taehyung but it’s overtaken by the one of Jungkook’s disappearance. “If he’s dead—”

“You don’t know if he is.”

“He might be.”

“Let’s say he is, the fuck are you gonna do, kid? Wither here and—”

Taehyung’s gaze settles on Minsoo who quietens. “I’ll kill them. It won’t matter who it is. The Council, the man with the scent, Seungwon. They’ll die if Jungkook has.”

“How about making a plan before that?” Minsoo grabs a satchel that he slings around his shoulder, his prosthetic leg clicking on the ground. “What do you know about his disappearance?”

“Yumi took him.”

“Could the Council be involved?”

“Possibly.”

“Let’s fly there.”

“It’s hours away from here on flight.” Taehyung rises to his feet. “I’d waste my time while Jungkook may be—”

“You’ve got a better plan?” Minsoo walks up to Taehyung, unafraid as he peers down at him. “You said it yourself. Your arcane isn’t useful and neither is mine for this. The others must be working on their sides as well to find that prince of yours, that’s including the ink warlock. We gotta cover every path. Like I taught you,” Minsoo says, who used to lecture Taehyung on the ropes of hunting. “What do you call him already? A viper?”

Taehyung confusedly nods.

“Right. Well we’ve got a viper to hunt, then. Can’t be that difficult to find.”

Taehyung exhales a puff of air. He doesn't bother healing the thin cuts in his palms. “Yeah, alright." Revna slithers up his arm to revert inside the ruby that is fastened around his neck.

“The Council is one path. Seungwon is another one we’ll check after.” Minsoo makes his way toward the cliff in his lair. “We might as well see if we can get that seal on your hemomancy off of you. They might be lenient if they know your husband’s gone.”

“It’s fucking—” A staccato rumbles in Taehyung’s chest, irregular and rapid. “Fuck.”

“Come on, kiddo. Let’s move.”

Minsoo shifts to his dragon self, not leaving any other choice for Taehyung but to do the same.

Woosung is inside the greenhouse, sifting through papers. His daughter stands by his side, her red eyes turning toward Taehyung. “Taehyung?” A concerned frown etches his face. “What has

happened?”

Byunghun is here as well.

The sight alone is enough to have Taehyung lunge forward and disregard Minsoo’s warning.

Byunghun tries to run away, however Taehyung is faster. He snares the man by the throat, then he squeezes. “Are you the one behind this? ‘Cause Jungkook and I fucked up your plan, didn’t we?”

“Taehyung.” Woosung raises some placating hands. “What—”

“Jungkook was taken away.”

“I can assure you that we are not behind this, Taehyung,” Woosung frowns. “We would not do such a thing, especially not after the vow we swore upon.”

“That vow is bullshit and we both know it,” Taehyung says through a callous chuckle. “Asking again…" His eyes drift on Byunghun. “Do you know anything about Jungkook’s disappearance?”

“I do not know what matter you are speaking of,” Byunghun says while Woosung converses with his daughter, an acrid stench wafting off of him. “I have not seen Dohyun again since your fight with the Council.”

“You were befriending that man. Yumi, the one who took Jungkook, is friends with him too.” Taehyung tightens his grip. “Makes me wonder.”

“Kid,” Minsoo intervenes and wrenches Taehyung’s hand away from Byunghun.

Byunghun coughs and takes several steps back, still alive when Jungkook could be dead and Taehyung fleetingly considers severing Byunghun's head from his body; see if it would abate the sinking pain within Taehyung.

“We cannot track Jungkook’s location through the vow, unfortunately,” Woosung declares.

“Do you know where Dohyun is?” Minsoo asks and Woosung shakes his head. “Next path.”

Taehyung turns around. “Fucking waste of time."

“Why was Jungk—”

“Don’t speak his name."

“Why was he taken?”

Taehyung marches toward Byunghun as he says “Do you really believe I’d be here if I knew, you fucki—”

“We’re trying to figure it out.” Minsoo snatches Taehyung by the back of his shirt and yanks.

Byunghun nods. “If you need any help—”

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “I’d tear my own limbs before I ask for your help.”

“Must I remind you that I have lost my own mate and that it is why I, so-called, betrayed dragonborns?” Byunghun says and glowers at Taehyung. “I know the pain you’re feeling, Taehyung. I know how maddening it is. I have barely survived the loss of my mate, and I have never been the same ever since.”

“You know nothing,” Taehyung sneers. “Jungkook is not my mate.”

Byunghun peers up at the darkened sky, the storm's downpour incessant as it rattles against the glass dome. “Is your arcane aware of it?”

Taehyung does not grace the remark with a response.

“Say, Woosung,” Minsoo starts, “anything you can do about that vow nonsense? There might be a fight once we find Jungkook. Taehyung may need his hemomancy.”

“I cannot. The vow has been taken and cannot be removed.”

“Hypothetically,” Taehyung says and shoves his trembling hands in his pants’ pockets, “if I cut off my branded hand, will the seal on my hemomancy be gone?”

Woosung’s eyes widen. He looks at his daughter who seemingly shrugs a shoulder, her black feather-like scales reflecting the bolts that lighten the sky. “She does not know.”

“Don’t speak a word about this. If Jungkook’s disappearance somehow spreads around, I’ll know it’ll be from the two of you.”

Taehyung swivels around without another word. Minsoo is right on his trail, the two of them making their way back to the platform.

“We have to find him,” Taehyung rasps, his mind constantly reeling back to the door and the terror that had taken over Jungkook's face.

“We will, kid. Let’s visit Seungwon next. Don't get hasty with him like you have with Byunghun.”

Some of Seungwon’s maids catch sight of Taehyung and immediately scurry back inside, shielding themselves from the rain.

Taehyung notices some movement in his peripheral vision.

Seungwon is facing two other maids, his head turned toward Taehyung. His gaze hardens. It darts between Taehyung and the sky. He knocks against the maids who fall backward when he shifts to dragon.

Seungwon begins to fly away.

Of course he does.

Thunder rumbles.

Wind collects in Taehyung's mouth, against his better judgment. It mingles with some of the bolts of the ambient storm.

His draconic instincts are always more heightened in this form. More primal and less reflective. They sometimes discard what human Taehyung would not do: like accidentally killing Seungwon, the leader of a large population of dragonborn, and starting another kind of war in Taehyung's life.

Seungwon flies on the opposite side of where Taehyung is hovering.

Taehyung's jaws part open.

He fires the dense ball of arcane at Seungwon.

The sphere whistles as it whirs through the air, crossing the yards at lightning speed. It hits Seungwon that it propels to crash onto the ground.

Taehyung races toward Seungwon, ignoring the warning nip on his hind leg. Something sinister creeps within Taehyung when the claws of his back talon pierce through the dragon below him.

Seungwon growls and fruitlessly snaps his teeth from where he's pinned to the ground.

Taehyung sinks his claws deeper.

Seungwon's muzzle opens, his one eye glaring at Taehyung. Taehyung watches the fire that pools at the back of Seungwon's throat.

One of Taehyung's front talons snares the underside of Seungwon's jaw as the gnarled fingers curl around it. His other talon grabs the top of the snout. The fire grows in Seungwon's mouth. The flames flicker, their heat hot on Taehyung's skin.

Seungwon wants to spit a little fireball at Taehyung, it seems. Taehyung can help with this.

Taehyung stretches Seungwon's maw open, wider and wider and *wider.* The jawbones wince under his pull, and the fire in Seungwon's throat dies there.

Taehyung does not stop there.

Half because his dragon snarls at him to continue, half because Seungwon has hurt Jungkook in the past. The man may serve as a temporary vessel for Taehyung's pained wrath.

The skin begins to tear on the sides of the muzzle. Seungwon writhes below and claws at Taehyung's limbs. However Taehyung is much stronger and heavier than Seungwon is. Realistically, Taehyung could effortlessly kill most dragons solely through his sheer strength.

Seungwon could be one of them, a gnarly voice whispers in Taehyung's mind, starved for blood.

Taehyung hesitates between tearing Seungwon's jaw apart or burning the head off until it is nothing but a pile of ashes. He opts to do both. Fire crawls up his chest, throat and mouth. His muzzle opens.

Something — *vines* — sling around Taehyung and yank him away from Seungwon.

Taehyung stumbles on his back and the vines' tug is harsh enough to drag him across several yards. He hears a whistle. He rises on his talons with a snarl. He can see Minsoo in his human form gesturing at Seungwon to turn as well.

Seungwon does, surprisingly enough. He's holding a hand to his jaw, some blood trickling from the tears at the corners of his lips.

Minsoo whistles again. At Taehyung this time. "Kid."

Taehyung walks forward, his claws dislodging patches of grass at every step he takes. It's only once he stands in front of Seungwon that he shifts to human. "Were you behind this?"

Seungwon's nose furls up around a gnarl. "I'll fucking—"

Taehyung cannot, for the life of him, understand how every dragonborn he headbutts with leaves their throat open for him to seize. One would think Seungwon in particular would have learned after the council meeting, yet the pig's reflexes are still too slow to evade the hand Taehyung grapples him with.

The vision of a knife stabbing through Jungkook's stomach flashes in Taehyung's mind.

Taehyung forms some wind around his hand in a sharp, invisible blade that he slowly pierces through the exact same spot Seungwon had once hurt Jungkook in. "Were you or not?"

Minsoo heaves a deep sigh.

"I don't know, what the fuck, you're talking 'bout," Seungwon pants, a hand gripping Taehyung's wrist.

"When was the last time you saw the man with the scent?"

"Council fight."

"What about Yumi?"

"S—Same." Seungwon's fingers tighten.

The bones in Taehyung's wrist crackle. The pain is minimal. If anything, it's grounding. It keeps him alive. "Do you know where they are?"

"No."

"Where can I find them?"

"I don't know."

The wind blade sinks further in Seungwon's side, enough for Taehyung to feel the blood that coats the tip of his fingers. "I don't believe that."

"I don't f—fucking know. Dohyun always changes headquarters and I obviously don't look for him since he stabbed my fucking eye," Seungwon spits. "And the warlock's elusive, an insane bitch."

"So you've got nothing to do with it?" Minsoo summarizes.

“With what?”

“Why would you run away, then?” Minsoo says. “Was the worst thing you could have done.”

“‘Cause his arcane's drowning the fucking place,” Seungwon grunts and glances at Minsoo. “The fuck d'you want me to do when the storm feels like it’s there to kill me.”

Seungwon looks genuinely confused as he staggers backward and falls down when Taehyung releases him.

Taehyung doesn’t know what to think.

The pain in his chest won’t stop.

Jungkook’s eyes fly open.

The first thing his mind registers is a sharp pain, bursting and spreading in his side. He blinks, his vision hazy and blinded by the sunlight that lightens the area.

The memories are fast and abrupt.

A door. A rock below him. Falling and bright hair.

“Oh. Finally.”

Jungkook’s head darts toward Yumi who’s sitting in an armchair and sipping on a beverage. His first instinct is to reach for his dagger, but he had not taken it with him this morning. Next is his wedding ring that he finds gone. The ring tracker and bracelet were also removed from him along with the wedding pendant.

Jungkook’s heart speeds up but he doesn’t succumb to the dread yet.

Dohyun isn’t here, if he remembers what Yumi had said.

So Jungkook inspects his surroundings.

He’s laid on a couch, inside a house that can only be described as a complete havoc.

There are papers littering the floor, more on desks, tables and other surfaces, some even pinned on the walls, yet it is nothing compared to the general mess of vials, boxes, contraptions and other plethora of knick knacks scattered everywhere in one giant cluster. There’s also a familiar, putrid smell that floats in the air.

“You’ve slept for quite a while."

Jungkook peers at Yumi, and he properly examines her for the first time.

The last time he had seen her, her hair had been black and kept short in a bob.

Here, they're of a deep purple, framing her head in heavy, messy curls that must fall down to her lower back. She looks young, but also not. She could be in her twenties as much as she could be in her forties or fifties and simply looking young. It's uncanny.

Yumi's features are defined and elegant: with round eyes, a button nose and full lips painted with some cherry lipstick, the red smudged on one corner of the mouth. Her complexion is light now, ashen, even, yet Jungkook remembers how her skin had been much more tanned when he had seen her at the manor. Yumi would be qualified as a beautiful woman by most, however there is an aspect to her appearance that gives Jungkook a sense of uncanny valley, where unease twists in him.

Perhaps it's her eyes that appear calculating yet completely devoid.

It's as though something is missing with her, but Jungkook can't figure out what.

Jungkook lifts an arm to press a hand against his throbbing ribs. "How long have I slept for?"

Yumi hums to herself, her legs drawn up from where she's slouched in her seat. "Seven hours, give or take."

Everyone else must be looking for him.

Taehyung must—

"Would you like some tea?" Yumi points at a tray precariously balanced on two pots on the coffee table. "It will heal your ribs. I think you cracked some of them."

"I'll pass."

"I'm sorry," Yumi says with a sheepish smile. The lizard on her head yawns when she scratches at the back of her head. "The big one was supposed to catch you but she was having too much fun in the water."

The palpitations of Jungkook's heart even out to a less erratic cadence.

Yumi is simply bizarre.

The sound of rocks scraping together erupts in the house.

Jungkook's gaze darts on the round, large familiar taking up a large portion of the living room. Its 'mouth' parts open around several rows of teeth at the top and bottom that seem to be made of flint or a material akin to this. It's feasting on something, tearing through the flesh as blood seeps through the wooden floor.

Jungkook belatedly realizes that the fare is a human corpse.

It seems fairly new and is covered in soil, as though it has been dug from the ground and brought here.

Jungkook isn't fazed by the sight. He has seen much worse at a too young age. Yumi, who is eating a piece of red velvet cake, also appears unperturbed.

"Why did you take me away?"

“I figured you would have refused to let me speak with you. More specifically, your volatile husband would have,” Yumi adds amidst a bite. “I thought of going about it in a more… Hmm. Appropriate way, but time was running out, and I acted rather impulsively, as I tend to. In retrospect, this was a terrible decision, uh? I’m curious to see what’s gonna happen now. Taehyung must be *mad.* ”

Jungkook ignores the addition. “How come Dohyun isn’t here?”

Yumi heaves a deep sigh then pouts as she places her cup on a stack of books. “My deal with the bird keeper has been a mess because *he* is a mess. He misses his dove. He’s become quite crazed about it,” she says and peers at Jungkook. “Dohyun did *not* like the loyalty Taehyung bled for you.”

“Does he feel threatened by me?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“And so you chose to betray him?”

“There would need to be loyalty for a betrayal to exist. Dohyun was useful to me. He isn’t anymore. I need a new employer, and Dohyun could become our common enemy. Or anyone else. Like Seohyung and Sungmin.”

“Why them?”

“Don’t you hate Seohyung?”

“How do you know?”

“I know many things,” Yumi says with an exaggerated whisper. “I have plenty of friends, and I’m a master at blending into all sorts of crowds.”

“That includes the Citadel?” Jungkook asks and Yumi nods with a hum. “Have you worked for Seohyung before?”

“I wonder,” Yumi sing-songs with a shrug. “Either way, as long as I’m being paid with what I want, there isn’t much I’m not willing to do. Like kidnapping, tearing wings, selling them. Fun stuff like this.”

Jungkook’s teeth grit together. “Is Dohyun aware of all this?”

“Well... No. I *did* want to announce my departure, but he’s too busy mopping around. He doesn’t like sharing, so he feels like you’re stealing Taehyung from him and he hates every bit of it, which I would usually find hilarious, but it makes him lose sight of our deal.”

“And what is this deal about?” Jungkook doesn’t bother standing or moving yet so as to not worsen his injuries.

“Help me create new connections, fund my research, and access a location in exchange for my familiars and I’s services.”

“What location?”

“Kaiya.”

Jungkook stills.

Yumi's smile grows. "I've always dreamed of going there but could never find a way to enter that place. I nearly died trying once, it was pretty fun."

"Is it linked to your research?"

"Among other things, yes." Yumi feeds some bits of cake to her lizard. "You're a necromancer. You may unearth interesting things there that I could use for myself, and I'd love to see you at work."

"You have before."

"And it was wonderful! I want to see more! I have so many questions and things to share with you, Jungkook."

Jungkook will comply with whatever Yumi asks of him for now. He's not scared of her, per se. He's confused and, against his wiser judgment, curious.

Jungkook weighs his options.

The lizard is the biggest crutch in finding an escape. It must have other songs that can affect humans. So Jungkook has to wait and gain time until an opening shows itself.

He misses Taehyung. Terribly so.

Fourteen hours have passed since Jungkook's disappearance.

"How long will this damn rain go on for?" Minsoo grumbles.

Taehyung peers at the sky. "I don't know." He steps inside his parents' house.

Nearly everyone is here aside from a few missing people. Their gazes drift on Taehyung. Woobin is also here, standing next to Jimin. Taehyung notes the way Woobin tenses when Taehyung and Minsoo walk further inside the house.

"Are you fine with Woobin helping us?" Jimin tentatively asks.

"I don't care," Taehyung says.

Only finding Jungkook matters to him at the moment.

"Taehyung," Dahee sighs, a worried frown etching her face. "Where have you been?"

"The Council and Seungwon."

A bitter whiff stenches the living room.

Taehyung bites back a remark.

“Are they alive?” Dahee wonders.

“You don’t see any blood on me, do you?” What remnants of Seungwon’s blood on Taehyung has been washed away by the rain.

“We have yet to find any information regarding Jungkook’s whereabouts,” Dahee starts. “However Yoongi and Hoseok left to visit Hyuna and work with her. They requested Revna’s presence.”

“Woobin could—”

“No,” Taehyung interjects and peers at Jimin.

“Alright. I'll take her there, then.” Jimin walks up to Taehyung.

Revna leaves the ruby and curls into a ball in Jimin’s arms. She glances at Taehyung with a disheartened hiss. Taehyung brushes her head. “It'll be fine.”

Revna nods then hides her head in the dip of Jimin’s elbow.

The two of them disappear to Hyuna’s house seconds later.

“We've scoured Eden and have looked for an object or anything else that may aid us in our searches,” Dahee carries on. “Nothing of crucial importance was found. We arrived back here half an hour ago. Hyuna has left us several bags of teleporting leaves.”

“This map may help,” Seokjin says and points to a parchment sprawled on the dining table. “It can track certain types of arcanes. Hopefully it includes necromancy.”

Taehyung's gaze snaps away from his mother to set on Seokjin. “Woobin’s here. Are you—”

“I already know about Jungkook. My father told me,” Woobin says and remains at a distance from Taehyung. “He… He told me about some of the things that happened at the manor.”

Of course the pig ran his mouth.

“The only issue is that necromancy is technically an expunged arcane,” Seokjin resumes. “So it—”

The entrance door opens.

Dahee greets the newcomer.

Taehyung’s head turns to see Elder Miseon enter the house. He dismisses her to walk around the dining table and pause on one end to survey the map. He can feel the Elder’s gaze on him and he glances up moments later.

“Taehyung... The Elders and I could feel your arcane,” Miseon announces, a certain cautiousness draped over her form that Taehyung catches onto.

Taehyung is only partially surprised by the news. Vanae’s people must have sensed his arcane as well, and it only makes sense for ancient dragonborns to feel it too.

“Your departure for Kaiya is in a few hours,” Elder Miseon continues.

“Jungkook is gone.”

The map looks absolutely worthless.

Another waste of time.

“Gone?” Miseon asks and Dahee gives her a run down of what has occurred. “Is he in an immediate danger or—”

“What do you think? He’s *gone*,” Taehyung snaps, forsaking any respect he would usually muster while addressing an Elder.

“I’m not certain I can push back the visit to Kaiya,” Miseon frowns. “It was already quite complicated to make it happen.”

“And?”

“And, it is a matter of priority,” Miseon says. “The next pulse is very soon. The issue with Kaiya’s guardian must be handled quickly, as it may be related to the plague.”

“You want Jungkook’s help and necromancy to potentially solve whatever is happening at Kaiya. Both are gone. You must be naïve to believe I will put anything else above him."

“His help is not necessarily requir—”

“Finding him is my priority,” Taehyung says with finality.

“I understand,” Miseon sighs. “Howev—”

“Think of me what you want, but I’d rather let dragonborns die from an inevitable disease than stop the search for Jungkook. The pulse will happen. We can’t stop in a few days a plague that has been killing us for fucking years. I’m looking for Jungkook. This isn’t a matter of opinion.”

“Perhaps—”

Taehyung’s breaths coil in his pouch in a staccato that breaks through the sudden stillness. His teeth grit together, his gaze set on the Elder. The acridity of the group’s dread heightens in the room, and Taehyung picks up on a similar scent coming from Elder Miseon herself.

“We’ll focus on Jungkook, yeah?” Minsoo intervenes and pats Taehyung’s shoulder. “You handle the Kaiya nonsense if it really can’t wait, Elder Miseon.”

Elder Miseon deflates, her shoulders slumping before straightening again. “I will see what I can do for Kaiya. I had initially come here early to inquire why Taehyung’s arcane is drowning the major part of Vanae.”

“The major part?” Dahee echoes with alarm.

"It worries me that Taehyung’s arcane can spread out so far," Elder Miseon continues. “Considering your lineage, you must exert control, Taehyung. Over yourself and your arcane. A leader does.”

“I’m not standing here as Vanae’s leader.”

“What else, if so?”

“Jungkook’s husband.”

A flash of surprise washes over Miseon’s face.

“Because this is who was taken away: my husband. It’s my husband who could be dead, tortured or going through Hell knows what. Meanwhile, you’re wasting my time, Elder Miseon,” Taehyung says and feels a slight pull in his eyes. “It’s just rain.”

“You and I both know it is not."

“I'm not seconds away from expunging my own land.” The storm worsens as Taehyung's frustration does.

“Your arcane is volatile.”

“As it’s always been. It comes with being a chaos dragon, does it not? Will you become part of those who wish to send me to my death at Bastille?”

“The opposite, Taehyung. I worry,” Miseon confesses. “I deeply care for you and always have, if what had to be done to save you from Dohyun is any indication. However your arcane—”

“Is under control, however the more I have to entertain this mindless chat distracting me from looking for my missing husband, the less it will be. The only ones my arcane will target are those standing in my way, which can easily be arranged.” Taehyung aims a pointed look at Elder Miseon. “I’ve always wondered if a chaos dragon can be more powerful than an Elder.”

Dahee clicks her tongue. “ *Taehyung.* ”

“Don’t waste my fucking time with Kaiya or anything else that isn’t related to Jungkook,” Taehyung warns and Elder Miseon solemnly nods. “This goes for everyone.”

“We simply worry, Son,” Junhyun softly says.

“No,” Taehyung chuckles without humour. “You’re scared of me, which does not matter.” He swiftly discards the subject. “Seungwon said he had nothing to do with Jungkook’s disappearance. I doubt he’s lying but he could still be.”

“I don’t think Seohyung or Sungmin are behind this either,” Namjoon says. “It seemed quite… random? For lack of a better word? It didn’t appear planned at all.”

“So it leaves us with Yumi and that Dohyun human,” Minsoo hums who has kept his hand between Taehyung's shoulder blades.

“If—” Taehyung exhales and leans forward on the table, his fingers balling into fists. “Let’s figure this map out. Jungkook has a book infused with his necromancy. It may work. And if it doesn’t we — We—” He straightens up and rubs a hand on his mouth before carding both through his hair and entangling his fingers on his neck, a restless anguish running through him that he can’t shake off.

“We’ll find another path, kid."

Jungkook is reclined against the backrest of the couch he was laid on. He had briefly fallen asleep and awakened again. “Why not simply talk to us instead of going to such extreme extents?”

“Now, that isn’t quite as amusing as infuriating a chaos dragon, isn’t it?”

“So you chose the option of kidnapping me for fun?”

“Fun. Time limit. Impulsiveness. And a dash of carelessness. I knew your departure for Kaiya was soon, so I had a very narrow window to convince you to let me join,” Yumi explains, sitting at one of her many workshop tables, her back to Jungkook. “Initially, I did want to speak. Normally. But I knew Taehyung wouldn’t let me. I also knew he wouldn’t believe a single word I’d say. Because I noticed before I opened that door, I was lurking around.”

“Noticed what?”

“The way Taehyung looks at you,” Yumi snickers. “It’s quite precious. Even more when he’s tearing his chest for you. *That* was spectacular. And it also confirmed that he wouldn’t listen to reason if I were to approach you in a less fashionable manner. Understandably so. I wouldn’t trust myself either. Sooo, I acted rashly, I made that door, you fell through it, bla, bla, bla… And here I am, living through the consequences of my actions.” She sniffs a vial then brushes her finger on the opening to lick whatever substance coating it. “Oh. Oh no. That’s poison. Isn’t that poison?” She asks her lizard that jumps down from her head to smell the vial she hands it. “Is it? I don’t remember.” The lizard tilts its head. “No? This tastes like poison though. So sour,” Yumi coughs and takes another vial that she downs. “Hopefully this antidote is the right one.” The lizard nods. “Good, good. You know what would be funny? Drinking more poison thinking it’s the antidote." She bursts into laughter as the lizard rolls around the table.

Jungkook stares at the back of her head, unsure of what to say.

“Anyway. I can’t complain much,” Yumi resumes. “It gives me much needed entertainment after working with the bleak Dohyun. You’d be craving reckless amusement too if you were in my place."

So Yumi is deranged, and that’s putting it mildly.

Jungkook still can’t pinpoint how old she is, and the dichotomy in her appearance shines in her personality. She’s clearly smart, yet has an evident carelessness in her that most adults wouldn’t have, at least not to such extent.

Jungkook is lost, unable to discern her or her motives.

“Are you genuinely having fun when you could die?”

“Yes! I’m in my home which is much safer than talking in the middle of the forest,” Yumi says, although Jungkook doesn’t know how safe this place is from Taehyung. “Plus it’s easier inside. The outside can be overwhelming, especially when surrounded by enemies.”

Jungkook hesitates between treating Yumi as a child or an adult, and so he decides to settle somewhere in the middle. “How long will you keep me here? I’d like to go back home soon.”

“The two doors she made for us both were taxing for her. She needs to rest and replenish herself for at least a few days before she can make a new door.” Yumi peers at her rock familiar. “And no one can leave or enter this place without her doors. It’s always a bit of a Pandora box to come back home,” she snorts. “You never know what to expect because I’ve got quite the collection of arcanic trinkets and familiars.”

If Yumi’s words are true, Jungkook is stuck here for the next few days.

He hasn’t drank or eaten since he was taken away.

The hours trickle by slowly, Jungkook silent and fighting sleep while he listens to Yumi’s constant rambling.

When Yumi prepares dinner later that night, Jungkook decides to join her.

He sits on one end of the table, Yumi on the other. The surface is brimming with knickknacks and instruments, leaving barely enough space for a plate and glass of water. There are also some tissues drenched in dried blood and a few gnawed bones that Jungkook believes to be human, presumably some remains of the rock familiar’s fare.

Jungkook peers down at the steak and rice on his plate.

He’s hungry.

He probably shouldn’t eat the food of the one who has kidnapped him, of an enemy, but Yumi isn’t quite this, isn’t she? She’s more of a Joker, whose place does not really fit in any deck of cards.

So Jungkook grabs his knife and chopsticks that are placed right next to a bloodied bone. He suspects that it has been put there on purpose in some kind of test. Jungkook cuts through the steak and eats a piece of it.

It’s odd how wrong it feels to consume a meal that hasn’t been cooked or served by Taehyung.

“Would you like a healing vial as well?”

“No.”

“Eating my food yet refusing the healing potion… Aren’t you a peculiar child? I understand why Taehyung is so taken by you. You’re interesting.”

“I’m not certain of him being taken by me, but he does care.” Jungkook takes another bite. “I’d suggest not provoking him, however considering that I fell through a door in front of him and have been gone for nearly a day, it's belated advice.”

Yumi is feasting on her own dinner, also seemingly unfazed by the scent of blood and whiffs of what can only be described as death coming from her familiar. “Do you believe he’ll want to kill me?”

Jungkook peers at her, the house dark around them aside from the lightened candles on the dining table. There’s a glint in her eyes, of pure amusement and curiosity. “Most likely.”

“Will he be stoppable?”

“I believe you’re forgetting about your own past with him, like the fact that you’re the reason why Dohyun got to torture Taehyung for six months,” Jungkook answers. “It’ll also depend on what I say. If I tell Taehyung that I find some use in you, he may be lenient with you.”

“And you say that he isn’t taken by you?”

“He’s loyal to me.”

“Are you to him?”

“I raised the dead to protect him. It should answer your question.”

“True,” Yumi nods. “Would you be the type to torture or kill quickly?”

Jungkook is taken aback by the onslaught of questions, but if entertaining Yumi is what allows Taehyung to find a way here or Jungkook an escape, then so be it.

“It’d depend on who it is, but I would wager the former.”

Yumi grins. “What about Taehyung? What would he do?”

“Taehyung is more volatile, as you already know. He's more prone to frenzy, ripping all apart without care."

Yumi makes a delighted noise and excitedly claps her hands. “Fascinating! How fascinating!”

Jungkook hates to admit it, but he can see a bit of himself in Yumi: in her evident interest with themes that most would find grim, but also in how she finds mirth in tip-toeing around precarious situations.

“Why are you interested in Taehyung and I?”

“My interests are eclectic, Jungkook.”

“And why do they include Kaiya?”

“Because of the guardian. As I told you, I would like to know more. I’m avid for knowledge of all kinds.”

“Only knowledge?”

Yumi chuckles. She rests her utensils on the table to prop her elbows on it and folds a hand over the other, her chin resting on them. “Maybe I’ve been lonely lately and am looking for new friends.”

Jungkook glances at the lizard that is gnawing on a bone of the carcass. “You want another familiar? How many do you have?”

“More than two.”

“You want to make Kaiya’s guardian your new familiar? Is this something you can do?”

“You should eat before it grows cold,” Yumi says with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Jungkook takes note of the warning and drops the subject.

Once done with their dinner, Yumi leans back in her chair and rubs a hand on her belly as she loudly yawns.

Jungkook hasn't finished his own plate, his appetite minimal. He has only eaten enough to keep a semblance of strength and aid his body in handling the pain of his cracked ribs and other bruises littering his body.

Jungkook thinks about Taehyung, then.

He tries not to, because when he does, he's hit by a longing that detracts him from the situation at hand. It aggravates the ache in his chest, its pain then becoming worse than the one in his ribs.

He misses him so much it's debilitating, and not even a day has passed.

Jungkook wonders if Taehyung misses him too. If perhaps Taehyung is thinking back on the moments they have shared in the tent, on the whispered discussions that were held in the cocoon of each other's company.

Jungkook is worried too.

He can only hope no repeat of what had gone down with the Council will occur again. Taehyung shouldn't risk being sent to Bastille to find him. However a selfish part of Jungkook craves to *see,* ever so mesmerized by how breathtaking Taehyung's chaos is.

"He'll kill you if you're not careful," Jungkook says with a purpose.

Yumi's answer is exactly what Jungkook expects it to be. "Death does not frighten me much."

"Why?"

"I'm sure you've had your own thoughts, haven't you? I've been watching your mind brew since you've arrived here, paying close attention to me. To my familiars."

The glass of water thuds when Jungkook rests it on the table. He reclines in his chair. His gaze locks with Yumi's excited one.

Jungkook's next question is uttered with a bluntness that Yumi grins at.

"How come your familiars eat human corpses?"

"What do you think?"

A nervousness flickers in Jungkook. It's accompanied by another uncanny buzz that Jungkook can't quite accept the origin of: hope. Tamed down by the remembrances of the suffering Taehyung has gone through because of Yumi.

"What interests you aside from Kaiya and me?"

"The primordial stone, however with no nefarious intent, unlike Seohyung. It seems to be related to the plague, and by extension to death. I'm curious about how it works, what arcane it holds."

Jungkook relates to this in some aspects.

The gnawing, acidic hope grows.

Jungkook is curious as well. He wonders if the souls that have died from the stone — if it can actually channel the plague —, would be different. Would they be granted peace? And if not, could Jungkook help them? Would they even still have a soul or would it be swallowed by the stone?

Jungkook's thoughts trail back to Eden and a certain book he was given.

Yumi had been down there with them at some point. Yumi is capable of changing her appearance, perhaps through potions. She has done so several times already: at the manor, in Taehyung's memories, and now, too.

Has he met her in Eden without realizing?

It's a long shot, Jungkook muses, however…

"Say, Yumi," Jungkook starts, his gaze drifting on the warlock. "You've been to Eden before."

"Yes. Many, many times, including when I was usurping your friend's identity."

"Have you ever wandered away from Yoongi, Jimin and Namjoon?"

"Yes." Yumi's smile grows more calculating by the second.

"Have you heard of a certain librarian there?"

"Aaah." Yumi folds an arm over her knee. "The old, chatty man?"

"Yes."

"Short, white gray hair slicked on his head, a big book in front of him, very neatly dressed?" Yumi describes.

"Do you know him?"

"I got the chance to be very closely acquainted with him. With his thoughts. His arcane…"

Jungkook's eyes widen.

He thinks back on how strange it had been to conveniently stumble on a book infused with necromancy but he never got the chance to fully question it, and the matter had then left his mind after the mess at the manor.

"You were him?"

Yumi taps her chopsticks against her glass in three consecutive clicks. "You're so smart! You could help me so much in my research unlike the old librarian who did not question the sudden letter requesting his presence outside of Eden. I'm surprised you didn't figure this out earlier."

"Wh—" Jungkook's mouth clamps shut for a moment. " *Why?* Why would you—"

"Dohyun had tasked me with keeping an eye on everyone. At some point, I'd decided to trail your group, which is when my lizard finally got to be close to you. She felt a pull toward you."

“So you… You took the appearance of the old man.”

“Yes,” Yumi giggles but it does not reach her eyes and something is so *off* about her. Even when her gaze appears amused, it doesn’t seem to be fully there. “I have a whole room full of these vials.”

“Am I speaking to your real self?”

Yumi shrugs. “Who knows.”

Jungkook’s fingers grip onto the arms of his chair. “What do you know about the wishing book?”

“It can grant three wishes.”

“As far as I could tell, only a necromancer’s blood can unseal the book, and only then does one have access to the instruction paper where the three wishes are mentioned."

“I know.”

“Did you stumble on this book by chance and give it to me to verify if I was a necromancer?”

“No for both. I've known you were a necromancer since the beginning.”

“How?”

Yumi shrugs again.

Could Yumi be closely acquainted with Seohyung who may have then told Yumi about Jungkook’s arcane?

Or could it be—

“How have you got to know about the three wishes, if so?”

“What do you think?”

“A possibility is that you befriended a necromancer who opened the book for you,” Jungkook starts.

“It is indeed a possibility,” Yumi hums and props her chin on her folded knee. “But you believe it’s something else, right?”

The pulsations of Jungkook’s heart resound between his ears, the thuds heavy and slow. He stares at the woman facing him, retracing every little thing he has seen of her and her familiars. Jungkook’s dry throat clicks when he swallows.

“I believe that you created the book. That the familiar is yours.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a necromancer.”

Yumi grins and bursts into laughter.

“I’ve never had anyone be so careful and attentive with me.”

Jungkook makes a soft sound. “Does it annoy you?”

“No.”

“Are you surprised you aren’t annoyed?”

“Yes.”

Jungkook chuckles.

“I don’t get it.”

“What is it that you don’t get?”

“How you manage to understand me so well.”

“Because I want to,” Jungkook simply says. “Do you want to understand me too?”

Taehyung nods.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Why?”

“Because you deserve to be understood.”

Taehyung tears himself out of his musings.

Thirty-seven hours have passed, and they have not found a single clue leading to where Jungkook may be.

Nothing.

Taehyung hasn’t slept a blink.

He keeps himself busy however he can: by flying across Vanae to perhaps see if his arcane can sense Jungkook’s, by meeting up this or that person that may have some information yet end up being useless, or by investigating any leads that end in an impasse every time.

It hasn’t stopped raining too.

Taehyung has tried to mitigate it; to withdraw his arcane from the sky; however the second he had made an attempt, he could have felt the chaos in him lashing out in answer, ferocious enough to force him into his dragon self. It had begged for blood and violence and had gnawed at Taehyung's humanity that had been more and more ruled by every impulse of his dragon counterpart.

So Taehyung has not tried again. He instead allows his arcane to storm above him.

His people are worrying, from what he was told. He could require their help in finding Jungkook, but it would imply making the disappearance public, a risk they can't afford for now.

Taehyung's hands won't stop shaking, frustrating him when he tries to cross out patches he has scoured already. The tremors halt when he finds something to narrow his mind on, but they reappear when he comes back empty-handed.

His body is also relentlessly straining against this fright attack he's on the edge of dipping into every few seconds. It doesn't help the exhaustion that has been weighing on him for a while now, but Taehyung discards it. It's nothing compared to what Jungkook may be going through.

Taehyung should sleep. He'd be able to think with a fresher mind, then. But it feels like a waste of time when he should be looking for Jungkook.

He has visited Hyuna's place as well.

Her and Yoongi are working on a spell that may make it possible to locate Jungkook through the bond he shares with Revna. They had tried to do so with the wedding pendant Taehyung has around his neck, and also with the book that holds Jungkook's necromancy, however the arcane in it isn't potent enough, unlike the one in Jungkook and Revna's bond.

Hyuna and Yoongi have also required the help of a few other warlocks they know. Yoongi has assured that Revna's existence has been kept secret. Taehyung doesn't trust the other warlocks at all, and he has mentally noted their names and appearance. Just in case.

The thing is, there isn't much that Taehyung can do.

His arcane is worthless. His connections with other lands and leaders led to nothing since everyone has agreed to not make Jungkook's abduction public. Taehyung doesn't know how to navigate around how powerless he feels.

It's as though he has been falling since Jungkook did, where Taehyung can't grip onto anything to pull himself back up, can't appease the pain in his chest or stop the sinking there that whirs in a frantic loop, and he doesn't understand *why* he's feeling like this.

Taehyung wonders if he's experiencing a drawn-out, cruel heart attack.

Maybe he'll simply collapse at some point because everything feels — *is* — void.

Taehyung could have led Vanae and Amaris with Jungkook, however he may have to handle it alone. He had wanted to take Jungkook on a proper hunting trip but it may not happen anymore and what will Taehyung do?

What is he supposed to do?

If the man with the scent is behind Jungkook's disappearance, Taehyung doesn't think he'll be scared to confront the man. The fury will take over. He can tell. And it's alien because no other emotion has overcome the fear when it has come to the man with the scent.

But right now Taehyung wants—

Ah…

He wants to tear everything asunder like he never has before.

It frightens him.

Taehyung may be growing mad, in every meaning of the word.

One moment he can't bring himself to use his voice, then the next he's snapping at his parents or someone else. One moment he feels like crying, and the next he feels *nothing.* Yet every time his chest hurts, and no remedy seems to help.

Taehyung goes to his and Jungkook's house at some point, hoping that it may help.

The house is empty when Taehyung steps through the doorway.

It's quiet and lifeless.

Jungkook's mug is still sitting on the kitchen counter. His botanic book and quill are next to it, opened on the sketch of a nocteal.

There isn't any chatter from Jungkook or Revna. No white noise of Jungkook's humming. No rummaging through the pantry or anything that Jungkook's presence would bring. The silence rings loud, Taehyung's footsteps echoing while he walks up the stairs.

He lays down on his bed that has somehow become Jungkook's along the way too.

Taehyung closes his eyes.

Maybe he can rest here for a bit.

However even then, Jungkook's absence is heavy, looming over Taehyung, made worse by the absence of a slow breathing or intelligible mumbling Jungkook tends to do in his sleep.

"Taehyung?"

Taehyung springs up at the call of his name. His gaze darts around, searching for the source of the voice, *for Jungkook,* however no one else is with him.

Taehyung's jaw clenches, face knitting.

He exits the bedroom and walks to their bathroom.

Theirs.

Just like the house is theirs.

Their garden. Their solarium. Their painting area. Taehyung's bedroom that has grown to be theirs as well where their shared clothes are.

Taehyung turns the faucet and passes some cold water over his face, trying to ignore the metal band of his wedding ring that brushes across his cheek. His gaze darts on the array of jewelry boxes and display stands neatly lined up on the sink counter.

Something whines in Taehyung's mind. Probably his dragon that has not stopped mourning Jungkook no matter how much Taehyung tries to reassure himself that Jungkook is alive.

Jungkook has to be.

Taehyung can still smell the floral caramel in the corridor he walks through to make his way downstairs. It's stuffy and overwhelming. It feeds into this stifling anguish because *Jungkook is gone* and Taehyung can't find him. Taehyung didn't catch him when he should have.

He marches out of the house that he slams the door of.

The place had become one of comfort, oddly enough, where it has begun to feel more like a home.

Taehyung flies to his parents.

He does not step another foot inside his and Jungkook's house after this.

He visits his hunting squadron to meet up with Insung, Mira and Yeji, the three hunters aware of Jungkook's kidnapping. They're the most competent hunters in Taehyung's teams, and their help may be fruitful, eventually.

They've retrieved an object to try and detect some remnants of Yumi's magic back where her door had swallowed Jungkook.

Still nothing.

"Are you happy?"

Jungkook wouldn't say he's happy, not when he was taken away from Taehyung and wants nothing more than to be reunited with him. However he experiences a certain sense of reassurance.

Jungkook had always feared of being the only necromancer left aside from his mother, no matter how unrealistic the thought may have been. With necromancy being a banned and expunged arcane, he had never even imagined that he would have the chance to meet someone like him who could perhaps teach him more about his heritage.

It's unfortunate that the person has to be Yumi.

"Are you truly a necromancer?" Jungkook asks.

"Yes. One of the very, very, very few still alive."

“So there are more?”

“Yes, but they’re hiding. Being careful. I know a few of them.”

It makes so much sense but Jungkook’s mind struggles to wrap around it.

“How many do you know?”

“Four.”

Jungkook nods. He swallows around the swelling lump in his throat and the urge to bore his knife through Yumi’s eye, Yumi's revelation leaving a bittersweet aftertaste on his tongue. “Does Dohyun know about you?”

Yumi shakes her head. “He believes I’m a regular warlock who can create familiars.”

“Did you make the book? What about your familiars? How are they related to your arcane? Can yo — Can you speak to the dead?” Jungkook fires and he has *so* many more questions to ask.

“The wishing book isn’t mine, and no, I can’t speak to the dead. As for my familiars…” Yumi peers up as she hums to herself. “They are infused with my necromancy and must eat corpses to sustain it. Let’s keep it at that for now.”

“Would they die if they don’t feed?”

“They would become inanimate, and I wouldn’t be able to use their abilities any longer.”

“Are they alive or dead?” Jungkook pushes aside his frustration when Yumi shrugs. “My mother is a necromancer,” he declares.

Yumi leans forward on the table where she folds her arms. “I had been wondering who you believe is a necromancer in your family. Arcane can skip generation after generation if the newborn isn’t capable of withholding arcane. So sometimes families can be unaware of how some of their ancestors were once warlocks. I assume you’re not talking about Seohyung when you say that your mother is a necromancer.”

“Seohyung isn’t my biological mother.”

“I’ve heard tales of how she treats you. No mother would hurt their own flesh and blood like this, huh?”

“I wouldn’t know. My father is a coward and my mother is… Wherever she is. She could be alive or buried underground.”

“Are you not curious to find her?” Yumi sways from side to side.

“I’m not sure.” Jungkook averts his gaze. “She abandoned me. I have no care for her.”

“I can help you find her. I want to see what kind of necromancy she has.” Yumi's eyes slightly widened and set on Jungkook.

Jungkook represses the urge to squirm in discomfort.

“I know many people, and if the world is small enough, perhaps she’s part of the necromancers I already know.”

“Taehyung knows if she’s alive or not.”

“We should ask him.”

“There is no ‘we’ between us.”

Yumi rolls her eyes and slumps back in her chair. “You’re no fun.”

“How old are you?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because you’re a woman and a necromancer."

Yumi barks out a laugh and dissolves into a series of snickers. “Are you— Are you asking if I’m your *mom,* Jungkook?”

“It could be possible.”

“Do I strike you as the kind to have a child?”

“You strike me as someone with an unexpected past, life and…” Jungkook pauses. “Everything, really.”

“Fair enough,” Yumi concedes with a nod. “Still not your mother though. I can take a truth serum and prove it to you if you want.”

Jungkook immediately jumps on the proposal. “Do it.”

Surprise washes over Yumi’s face. “Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

“Fetch a bottle,” Yumi says to her lizard that disappears for a moment. When it — she? According to Yumi — comes back, it’s with a triangular vial held in her tail that she rests on the table. “But how can I prove to you that this is an actual truth serum?”

“I take a sip of it.” It’s risky and absolutely inane, but Jungkook is dragged along by Yumi’s nonchalant playfulness, and most importantly, he has questions to ask for which he needs the full truth. “Deal?”

“Deal!” Yumi snatches the vial, flicks off the cap and drinks half of its content. “Oooh, this one tastes like blood,” she says and gives the bottle to her lizard.

“Is *it* made of blood?” Jungkook asks and watches the small reptile making her way toward him.

“Maybe? I don’t remember.”

Jungkook does not hesitate when he takes the vial from the lizard and finishes what’s left of its content. He washes the metallic aftertaste with some water and says “I hope for you this was not

poison.”

“It’d take the fun out of everything if I were to kill you. What is your name?”

“Jaeh—” Pain shoots in Jungkook’s mind as his tongue tries to form around the lie. He presses a hand against his side to abate the flaring there as he bends forward. He still tries to fight the pain but he can’t for very long. “J—Jeon Jungkook,” he gasps, forced to do so no matter how much he attempts to remain quiet. He pants for a moment to catch his breath, his vision speckled with white dots.

“Do you believe me now?”

“Is— Is this vial… Only a truth serum one?”

“Yes.”

Jungkook grunts and winces, blinking the prickling in his eyes. “Fuck.”

“You still don’t want a healing potion?” Yumi asks and points at what the lizard is handing to Jungkook. “It’s not a potent one, so it won’t entirely heal your wounds, but it’ll help with the pain. I got it at the Seven Isles.”

Yumi isn’t lying. Jungkook knows this, and so he takes the healing potion that he gulps down. The pain immediately recedes and Jungkook sighs in relief.

“What would you like to know?”

“Are you my mother?” Jungkook bluntly asks to get this hypothesis out of the way.

Yumi barks out a laugh. “You won’t let go of this, uh?”

“Answer me.”

“I am not your mother, Jungkook. I’ve never had a child, and I do not intend to. Except for using them as a fare for my familiar.”

Jungkook’s eyes widen.

Yumi laughs again. “I’m joking."

Jungkook isn’t so certain of that.

Jungkook relaxes in his chair nonetheless. He’d rather have an absent mother than one like Yumi, quite frankly. “Do you know my mother, then? Or anyone else from my family?”

“Not that I know of, aside from your father Sungmin.”

“Do you think you may have met her before?”

Yumi hums to herself. “Maybe? I do know two women necromancers, one of them is too young to be your mom, but the other one would be old enough.”

“Was Seohyung one of your employers once?”

“Yes.”

“What work have you done for her?”

“Only her and I know,” Yumi says, evading the answer.

Jungkook takes the hint, changing the subject of the conversation. “Let’s say you help me find my mother and teach me more about necromancy, as well as get me acquainted with the necromancers you already know, what do you want in return?”

“First: a free trip to Kaiya. Second…” Yumi trails off to rise on her feet. She walks away from the dining table to grab a large pot. “I’ve seen that snake of yours. I also know it’s a basilisk,” she says and crouches in front of her rock familiar. “I’m interested.”

“Why?”

“Will you put a word in my favor for Kaiya?”

Jungkook ponders for a second then says “Yes.”

“If you do not, finding you will be very easy, Jungkook. You fell once, you can fall again,” Yumi warns as she gathers the human bones and throws them in the pot, blood soon coating her fingers. “Killing you wouldn’t be too difficult for me.”

“I know.”

“Excellent!”

“Tell me why you’re interested in my basilisk.”

“I have met a basilisk in the past.” Yumi peers at Jungkook. “‘It’ had once been a ‘she’.”

Jungkook’s heart seemingly pauses.

Yumi chuckles and goes back to her task.

“Basilisks were once people,” Jungkook concludes but he still waits for Yumi to confirm it again before releasing the breath he had been holding.

“Yes, however cursed by warlocks.”

All at once, Jungkook’s thoughts veer back to the shrill and how Revna had been affected by it.

He recalls how Revna had come to life years ago: when he had fallen and bled on the scroll he had stolen, and how Revna and her ruby had then appeared. Jungkook never got to know what the ruby does aside from working as another dimension Revna can transmute in and out of. However he remembers the results of the arcane detecting ring. Taehyung had said that it had detected blood in its composition, and that it had deemed Revna’s sentience as ‘partial’.

“So she— My basilisk—”

“Was once human.”

Jungkook doesn't really know how to process the information, that the snake he had always thought to be a familiar had once been a living, breathing human like him.

"Is there—" Jungkook's teeth click shut as he stares at the table without seeing anything. "Is there a way to reverse the curse? Or remove it?"

"The past is a funny thing, isn't it? How often do we wish to undo a mistake, a wrong decision."

"Can we or not?" Jungkook snaps, his gaze darting on Yumi.

"This is what I would like to know as well," Yumi says and she presents a bone to her familiar that has some remains on it.

"Why?"

"Because I'm curious. Your basilisk seems to be powerful and one of a kind, and I noticed that my familiar's song had affected her, somehow. Yet this specific lullaby is effective on dragonborns *only.* Not humans, not warlocks or reptiles in general."

Jungkook stands from his chair that scrapes across the floor. He braces against the backrest with a hand "Does… Does this mean that my basilisk was a dragonborn?"

"It makes sense, no?"

"That's…" Jungkook shouldn't fully trust Yumi's words in spite of the truth serum they've both consumed, but why would she lie if she could? Her interest for Revna is genuine, that much Jungkook is certain of. "What about the seal on her forehead? Have you seen it? Is this a physical aspect of the curse?"

"Maybe. I don't know. The other basilisk didn't have any sigil, at least none that I could see. But the one your basilisk has may be related to necromancy."

"Necromancy? Could it be because I'm bonded to her?"

"Maybe. It seems that you've bonded with her, perhaps you and her have shared arcane during it. Plus a part of the sigil resembles an ancient, forgotten rune about death and poison, which isn't necessarily necromancy, but…" Yumi shrugs. "I'd like to study your basilisk."

"But she can't be a necromancer if she was a dragonborn."

"This is what I'm confused about as well. Perhaps the curse was made by a necromancer. Who knows."

"What does it have to do with Kaiya?"

"The guardian may know more about this, and as I told you, I love to learn," Yumi smiles and straightens up. She walks to the open kitchen where she pours some water in the pot of bones. "Kaiya's guardians were incredibly old and full of knowledge. I yearn for it."

"What about the stone?"

"Ah the stone is just a toy I'd like to tinker with. That's all. I've been wondering about it since I learned that it may be a catalyst for the gloomy little plague killing dragonborns."

“You do realize that I won’t let you anywhere near my basilisk, right?”

“So hostile,” Yumi obnoxiously snorts. “I’ll be content unraveling what she is and her story from afar.”

Jungkook highly doubts that it is all Yumi wants, but he doesn’t say more about this matter.

“So my basilisk is… She’s a dragonborn.”

“It’s the only conclusion that makes sense.”

Jungkook sits back on his chair.

He needs to get back to Taehyung.

When Jungkook lays down on the mattress in the bedroom Yumi has given to him, an unexpected wave of loneliness hits him.

He doesn’t know what is true and what isn’t anymore, if perhaps Yumi somehow lied to him in some ways. Maybe he was too trusting in his ability to read her, and too eager to play with fire.

He’s tired and confused and he can't make sense of the possible fact that Revna has been human, *a dragonborn,* all along without him suspecting it.

What if she’s stuck in this snake form forever? What if Jungkook somehow messed everything up when he'd accidentally unsealed her from the scroll? What if *he* cursed Revna to a worse fate? Perhaps Revna could have been summoned in her human form and be saved from the snake one if Jungkook had not rebelled against Seohyung and Sungmin.

Jungkook lays on his tender side, the pain a reminder to remain awake for as long as he can. He folds his arms under his head and nestles his head in the dip of his elbows, wishing that it was Taehyung’s neck instead.

The bed is cold and empty, devoid of Taehyung’s warmth or the lightning that sometimes dances out of Taehyung’s mouth or on his fingers when he’s deep in his sleep.

Jungkook doesn’t want to cry.

He does not have any reason to. He’s fine, aside from his injuries, and unlike everyone else, he's aware of this. He still hides his face and prickling eyes against his arm, biting on his lower lip to muffle his quiet sobs.

He’s scared, all of a sudden.

The room is dark with only the moonlight seeping through the window, and it reminds Jungkook of all those nights he had to spend on his own when he had been a kid, never allowed to be granted any kind of comfort.

Jungkook curls in on himself.

He’s cold and lonely.

He misses Taehyung.

He wants to come back home.

“Would you be sad if I was gone for, like, a month? … Would you miss me?”

Taehyung imagines it for a fleeting second.

It elicits an ache in him, a little bitter, a lot bereft, and wholly lonely.

“I’d be bored.”

◯◯ *SIX DAYS LATER* ◯◯

The days are all starting to blur into one.

The rain is still here.

The tremors are gone, however, tamed down by the numbness that has risen in Taehyung since the third day of Jungkook’s disappearance. They do come back when the cloudy sky darkens, right when midnight strikes and another day begins.

Taehyung is at his parents’ house tonight.

In two hours, it’ll be six days since Jungkook has vanished into thin air.

Taehyung needs to sleep, but he can’t bring himself to do so aside from the brief few naps he takes and wakes up with a startle.

He removes his wedding ring because he doesn’t want to dirty it while he washes the few cups in the sink. He makes himself some coffee minutes later. It doesn’t taste quite right but it’s better than nothing to keep himself awake.

Taehyung walks outside of the house to sit down on the bench tucked against the wall, the spot protected from the rain by a glass sunshade. He sits down and hunches forward.

“Have you eaten?”

Taehyung startles at his mother’s voice. “No.”

“You haven’t eaten since yesterday morning, Son,” Dahee says and sits down next to him.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Taehy—”

“Would you rather I eat and barely keep it in for an hour?” Taehyung peers at the coffee that he twirls in the cup. “Revna still hasn’t felt him in their bond again.”

“That does not mean he is dead.”

“I know.” Taehyung places his cup on the ground. He folds his hands together as he peers ahead at the forest. “Are you scared of me?” He hasn't been blind to the way most have been avoiding his presence like the plague.

“Your wrath can be frightening, and there is nothing wrong with it.” Dahee rests her hand on his knee. “I believe the only one who would not be scared is Jungkook.”

“He said it’s pretty.”

“Of course he did. This crazed boy,” Dahee chuckles and falls quiet for a moment. She peers up at the sky. “Your arcane is in control.”

“S'just rain,” Taehyung quietly reiterates, rendered cold from the lack of sun of the past few days. “Just needs to be out. My arcane's fine. I promise.”

“I know. I can tell. It seems peaceful, in spite of everything.”

“It’s calm, but it’s not at peace.”

A silence floats between them where Taehyung fiddles with some lightning in his hands to distract himself from his wandering thoughts.

It doesn’t work for very long.

“There’s this stupid thing I can’t stop thinking about.”

“Regarding?”

“I bought a few things for him some time ago,” Taehyung confesses. “I haven’t given them to him ‘cause I was embarrassed, I guess. And it’s— What if I can’t give them to him anymore?”

“You will, Taehyung. There is no—”

“Everything that could have gone wrong always did. We nearly died at the manor, then the fight with the Council happened, and there’s this whole clusterfuck with his parents and Seohyung. We’ve got so many targets on our back that an abduction could equal death. There’s half a chance of us looking for his *corpse* right now and—” He waves off the lightning from his hands and rubs the tip of his fingers over his mouth, his knee jumping up and down. “Why didn’t I give him those stupid gifts? Some things aren’t worth being scared of.”

“You will, Taehyung.”

“What if I can’t? What if he’s dead?”

“Let us not anticipate the worst outcome, lest it sets the evil eye on him. We will find him. Alive.”

“Revna said—”

“Yoongi and Hyuna confirmed that Jungkook is most likely hidden from his bond with Revna, not severed from it. The bond is still alive, the very proof that Jungkook is too.”

“Right.” Taehyung nods. “Right.“

“We at least know he is not detained by Seungwon or the Council.”

“Yeah, and he could be with the man with the scent. He had this look in his eyes. I know he’s not interested in Jungkook anymore. He sees him as an obstacle to get to me now, and there's nothing stopping him from killing Jungkook.”

“There is one thing.”

Taehyung peers at his mother.

“Your care for Jungkook,” Dahee smiles, something small and dampened. “Dohyun would not kill Jungkook when he can use him as leverage against you. It is a terrible thing to say, but it is true.”

Taehyung exhales. He rubs his palms over his face and he cards a hand through his strands, unable to remain still. When they lower, the tremors are back anew, running through his fingertips. “What if Jungkook’s dead, Mom?” He whispers, unable to speak any louder.

“What if he is?”

“I don’t know what I’d do. I… I’ve gotten used to him. To have him around and— And he asked me if I’d be sad if he was gone for a month. Told him no. Thought I wouldn't be. But if he’s dead, I —” Taehyung pauses to press the heel of his hands against his eyes. “I’d be so *mad,* and I don’t think it’d be the kind I’d come back from.”

“You cherish Jungkook, deeper every day that passes, my son. There is nothing abnormal about feeling as such.”

“It’s different from the family. I didn’t know it was possible to care like this.”

“For a human?”

“No. For someone.”

Dahee’s fingers knead Taehyung’s leg.

“I can’t stop shaking. I can’t even eat, Mom. I can’t sleep. I can’t *breathe.* Every breath I take is torn away and— And he's all that I can think about. I can't think about anything else. I don’t even know why because it’s— It’s just… It’s just him, right? It’s just—” Taehyung presses his trembling lips together. “Why am I feeling like this?”

“You care, Son."

“I cared about Kija and it wasn't anywhere near how I currently—”

“It is not the same and you know it,” Dahee firmly objects. “You cannot compare. Your affection for Kija is different from the one you nurture for Jungkook. The situation is too. Drastically.”

The ache in Taehyung’s chest strains and he forsakes it to instead focus on the bloodthirsty resolution that slowly sets in him. He slowly inhales and exhales, then he says “Do you think the Council is behind this? They denied everything, but I’ve been nursing my doubts.”

“I don’t see why they would go through such an endeavor,” Dahee sighs, “especially after the vow we took.”

“To get me to do something stupid and have a final reason to send me to Bastille. Or execute me right away.”

“Will you challenge them if they instigated Jungkook’s disappearance?”

“I don’t need a challenge to get rid of them like they’ve been wanting to do with me for years,” Taehyung says and stands.

“Son… You must act with reason, as you have so far. You do not know if the Council is behind this or not.”

“Neither do you,” Taehyung retorts with more spite than wanted.

Dahee rises to her feet. “You cannot be reckless.”

“I’m not reckless.”

“Challenging members of the Council is *both* reckless and foolish.”

“ *If* the Council is behind this,” Taehyung starts and turns to face his mother, “a challenge will be least of their concern and I know that as a future leader I shouldn’t be saying this, or riddling the sky with my arcane. I *know* this. But I’m not— I’m not Vanae’s leader, right now. I can’t be. Not when Jungkook isn't with me.”

“Even then, Taehyung, you—”

“I scented him.”

Surprise washes across Dahee’s face.

“I scented him and it was so, *so nice* because you know how I’ve never let my dragon, its instincts or chaos run free. You know how I’ve always had to keep it in a cage. But in the tent I scented Jungkook and I did again when we were home and I— I didn’t question anything unlike I usually do. I didn’t have to worry about anything. I never have to with him. I can just feel,” he says, his words ending in a hoarse whisper, voice stifled. “He opened the cage or maybe he’s the key to it but right now— Right now *everything* in me is mourning and so damn lonely.” He taps his chest to try to alleviate its pain but it’s worthless. “Because my— Because *he* is gone. Right when I finally decided to simply enjoy things with him. Right when he allowed *himself* to live his life however he wanted to. Jungkook is gone. He was taken away. *From me,* ” he rasps, his vision blurred. “So what I said days ago to Elder Miseon goes to you and everyone else,” Taehyung continues as he steps closer to Dahee. “Leave me be, Mother, and I say this with all the love that I have for you because I

would never want to hurt you or our family, but if you or anyone else stands in my way to find Jungkook—" He halts when his mother cups his cheek.

"I understand, my son." Dahee presses a kiss on his forehead. "I understand," she states, even when Taehyung himself does not understand. "You need to sleep."

"I can't. I need—"

Taehyung turns away from her.

He marches through the garden to be as far from the house as he can.

He trips over a branch at some point when he has reached the outskirts of the forest. He only gets to walk into it for a few seconds before he has to recline against a tree.

The world sways around him, speckles dotting his vision. He drops to sit on the ground. The soil is wet and seeping through his clothes. The downpour is too, soon drenching him and weighing down the sweater he's wearing. It's too hefty.

Suffocating.

Taehyung slings the garment over his head and tosses it aside. He heavily inhales and exhales as he tries to blink away the haziness.

He can feel this sense of impending doom rise in him and speed up the palpitations of his heart. He narrows his attention on sending air into his lungs that feel depleted and stiff. A curse slips past his lips but it sounds more like a strangled noise than anything else. He can hear his own erratic respiration, and it only serves to heighten the fright attack that begins to rattle through him.

What if Jungkook is actually dead?

What if he never comes back?

Maybe they'll only find a corpse in a ravine. Maybe Taehyung will see Jungkook in a pool of his own blood like he had with Kija.

The loss of Kija had been brutal and had gone down in the span of a few hours.

Here with Jungkook, it feels endless as the days stretch.

The guilt is worse, the terror is too and one of a kind, the *'What if's* as well, and Taehyung doesn't know what to do.

He should've seen the door but didn't.

He should've caught Jungkook but didn't.

He should have already found him yet still hasn't.

Taehyung has done his best to keep everything at bay. He has an inkling that his grandfather has helped with it. However it all comes crashing down now and he doesn't understand why.

The cold rivulets of the rain trickle down his back and face when he hunches forward, strands of hair plastered to his face. He attempts to breathe in four and out for five but he can't, every respiration intersected by the self-lashing that he should be looking for Jungkook instead of wasting his time drowning in himself.

What if Taehyung can't ever catch his breath again?

For the second time, he may have lost someone too soon because of him, someone who has carved his place within Taehyung, wherever that place is. Jungkook has weaved his way through Taehyung, stayed there, and is now gone.

Taehyung attempts to anchor himself on the rain, on the cold ground beneath him and the tree bark against his back.

He breathes in for three and out for two.

Three and two, three and two, *three and two.*

His fingers feel numb, like their strength is gone when he balls them into fists.

"Storm. Storm… Please, storm. Please."

Something rips within Taehyung when he realizes that the only person who would understand is gone and he brushes his thumb on his ring finger, the only left linking him to Jungkook.

He meets his skin instead of metal.

Taehyung lifts his left hand.

The wedding ring isn't here anymore.

Dahee converses with the rest of the group regarding their incoming departure to Hyuna's place. The door leading to the garden swings open. Her head swivels around to peer behind her.

Taehyung's eyes are a little red and he looks aghast, *livid,* his shirt and pants sticking to his form as droplets of water fall on the floor.

"Taehyung?"

"My ring," Taehyung croaks out and marches inside the house.

"What has happened?"

"My wedding ring," Taehyung pants as he enters the kitchen. "It's gone."

Dahee watches her son drag his hands across the kitchen island. He pats the surface, his breathing uneven and too fast. Dahee motions her head at everyone else. She and the group occupying the living room join Taehyung in the kitchen.

“Where did you last leave it?”

“On the sink? I was cleaning the cup and I removed the ring ‘cause I didn’t want to dirty it and then I left and… And I forgot it?” The guilt that coats Taehyung's voice stings in Dahee’s chest. “I forgot to put it back on. *I forgot.”* Taehyung pushes the drying rack aside but Dahee isn’t fast enough to prevent it from crashing to the ground. “Fuck. It’s gone. It’s— It’s gone.”

“It must be here.” Junhyun crouches and begins to sift through the broken porcelain.

Taehyung rummages through the sink and he mustn’t be paying attention to his strength because he leaves the imprint of his fingers on the metal. “I can’t find it. It’s not there.”

“It probably fell somewhere,” Jimin says as he looks through the cupboards on the wall.

Dahee searches the kitchen as well, more toward the outskirts in case the ring has rolled to the living room.

Her son’s distress is palpable. It drowns the room in its sourness and Dahee has to turn away from seeing him frantically search through the kitchen.

Dahee has always been close-knitted to her son, the two of them sharing a bond where no words need to necessarily be spoken for them to understand each other. So she can feel Taehyung’s pain and sorrow that has not alleviated once since Jungkook’s disappearance, and that is now alarmingly aggravating.

Dahee presses a hand against her mouth and blinks away the tears in her eyes. She peers up when someone cups the back of her nape and her mate soothes her anguish with a kiss that he presses against her temple before he resumes his task.

She startles when something is thrown across the room, sent to crash into splinters on a wall. It’s one of the lower cupboards’ doors that Taehyung has removed from its hinges.

“Fuck. I can’t— I can’t find it. I can’t find it,” Taehyung laments but it reads more like a sob that Dahee tries to ignore.

She makes her way back inside the kitchen where everyone is ransacking. Yoongi even produces some ravens that fly around the room and peer under the couches and other narrow spaces. Dahee’s skin prickles and her hair rises on her arms with the charged electricity that suffuses the house.

She halts in front of the sink while Taehyung focuses on the kitchen island again. Dahee peers inside the sink’s pipe of the drain.

Something shines at the bottom.

She does not hesitate when she tears the draining hole to have better access. She squeezes her hand through the pipe. Her fingers catch onto something that she yanks out. Relief rushes through her when she sees the wedding ring. She rinses it and calls for her son. “Taehyung.”

“It’s not here.” Taehyung paces around before looking through an opened cupboard.

“Taehyung. Son.” Dahee grips Taehyung’s shoulder to grab his attention. “I found it.” Taehyung’s head turns toward her. “Here.” She presents her palm where the ring resides.

Taehyung heaves a shaky sigh and his shoulders slump with a tilt of his head. He takes the ring that he inspects the ruby of before cleaning it with the rim of shirt. Then, in an ever so gentle motion, as though the ring is made of the most fragile and precious matter, he passes the golden band around his ring finger. He cradles his hand against his chest, his thumb brushing back and forth on the gem.

However Taehyung's respiration catches again, his eyes a little dazed and unfocused as he stares at the ground.

“Son. Breathe. *Please,* ” Dahee instructs and it sounds a little desperate but she fears what may be happening to her son. “Breathe.”

“I have to find him.” Taehyung doesn’t seem to see or hear anything. He staggers out of the kitchen, his steps punctuated by his hitching breath. “Did you find anything? Or—” He pauses in front of the dining table where a map is laid out. “Anything?”

“Taehyung,” Dahee begins and she tries to cup his face but he twists his head away from her.

“I need to find him.” One of Taehyung's hands holds onto his wedding pendant and Revna’s ruby. “Why— He’s gone. S’gone. My wedding ring.”

Dahee moves to face Taehyung. She touches his cheek with a palm. “It’s right here,” she says and raises Taehyung’s left hand. Taehyung peers down. “The ring is right there.”

Taehyung shakes his head. “No. It’s gone.”

“It isn’t.”

“It’s gone.”

“Son—”

“It’s gone. He’s gone. I don’t know what to do.” His brows furrow as his gaze blurs and a tear slides down Dahee’s thumb when it escapes Taehyung’s eye. “I don’t know,” he whispers and Dahee’s heart wrenches when Taehyung breaks into tears for the first time since Jungkook's disappearance.

Dahee hugs her son against her chest, cradling the back of his head.

Taehyung grips onto the back of her blouse. “I don’t— I don’t know what’s going on,” he says amidst two aborted whimpers. “I can’t breathe. I can't.”

“Everything will be alright.” Dahee ignores the swelling lump in her throat and her own tears. “We’ll find him. I promise.”

“I’m scared.” Taehyung’s body is rattled with sobs that Dahee tries to soothe by carding a hand through his hair and allowing her son to fall apart in her arms. “Can’t breathe. Why… Why can’t I breathe? I c—can’t breathe anymore, Mom.”

Dahee peers at Junhyun whose face is etched into a glower she has rarely witnessed from her mate.

“F—Feels like… Like I’m dying. It hurts so much,” Taehyung quietly cries. “I don’t know why.”

Dahee does.

She has seen this kind of sight in the past, when a dragonborn loses their mate or closed ones to death, betrayal or falling out of love. Some of them have survived the loss, like Jimin who wipes his eyes and nods at something Yoongi says to him.

“Where does it hurt?”

“My heart,” Taehyung rasps against her shoulder. “Help me, please… I don’t know what to do. St—Storm, storm.”

Dahee’s gaze darts on Minsoo who’s taking out a plant and jar from the satchel he has slung around his shoulder at all time for the past days. Minsoo takes some of the pot’s content to smear it on the plant in his palm and crush both together in a green paste.

Minsoo walks up to Dahee and Taehyung, and Dahee feels like a child again as all she does is stand still and waits for her father to aid her.

Minsoo wedges a hand between Dahee and Taehyung’s chests to flatten his palm against Taehyung’s, right above the heart.

Minsoo’s eyes close.

They fly open seconds later to stare at Taehyung before glancing at Dahee. Minsoo breathes on the green mud in his hand that takes a deep red color. He places his covered palm on the back of Taehyung’s neck and Dahee surveys the way the red liquid seemingly melts into Taehyung’s skin and disappears.

Taehyung immediately goes lax in her arms. His breathing, although still uneven, quietens and slows down.

Dahee rubs Taehyung’s back, tapping in a distinct pattern like Jungkook had done when Taehyung had had a fright attack after the wedding. She doesn’t get to do so for very long before Taehyung breaks the hug.

Taehyung shuffles backward. Minsoo catches him in time when he sways on his spot and guides him to lean against the kitchen counter.

“Don’t move around too much for a few minutes," Minsoo says.

“What’s going on,” Taehyung slurs and his head lolls forward, his trembling fingers hovering above his heart.

“You’re a little dizzy. It will pass.” Dahee crosses the distance to comb through Taehyung’s tousled and wet strands. “Does your chest still hurt?”

Taehyung nods, his eyes puffy and red. “A little.”

“Focus on your breathing. You’re fine, kid,” Minsoo says and Taehyung nods again.

“We’re close to finding Jungkook,” Yoongi says.

Taehyung stares at him through his bangs. “Yeah, and in what state?”

“Alive.”

Taehyung scoffs and more tears slide down his cheeks when he blinks. “It’s been six days of nothing. Nothing and— Fuck." Taehyung heaves around a quiet cry. He leans forward, hands on his knees as he pants into the air. “Not a single clue, of where he could be. He vanished, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I don’t know what to do.”

“Hyuna and Yoongi are almost done with the spell, which is why Yoongi is here, Taehyung,” Jimin says. “We’ll use Revna and Jungkook’s bond to try and locate him.”

“Is it—” Taehyung pauses, the storm pouring outside. “Is it dangerous?”

“Yes, but they’ll handle it. Jungkook will,” Yoongi reassures.

“How can you know?” Taehyung rounds the kitchen island but he doesn’t get to go far before he staggers and hunches over the counter, resting his forehead on it. He hugs his own chest with an arm.

Dahee is watchful, ready to bring him to the bathroom if need be.

“My mind is— Can’t stop thinking he’s dead.”

“So you’ll stop searching for him?”

Taehyung emits a strained laugh. “I’ll die before I stop.”

Dahee wonders if Taehyung is aware of how close to reality his words are.

“Then *move*," Jimin snaps. "We’ll need you there in case anything goes wrong with the spell.”

“I would like for everyone to leave, please,” Junhyun says as he makes his way toward Taehyung. “Now.”

Those in the living room all grab one of Hyuna’s transporting leaves without another word.

Namjoon, Hoseok, Seokjin and Yoongi are the first to teleport out of the house.

Dahee is about to do so as well, the leaf in her hands from where she’s standing next to her father. “How is he?”

“He’s fine for now. But the muscles in his heart were weakened. Been trying to help with it, but… My arcane isn’t what it used to be anymore.” Minsoo plucks a vial with a dark liquid that he downs in one go.

“You have been drinking these a lot the past day,” Dahee remarks. “You have also kept away from me while only allowing Taehyung to visit you.” Her gaze meets the unreadable one of her father. “Are you both hiding something from me?”

“Yes,” Minsoo says with blunt honesty. “Everything is fine. Don’t worry about me or him. At least not for this.” He speaks out the address of Hyuna’s place and disappears without another word.

Dahee does not mean to spy on what Junhyun rasps in Taehyung’s ear, but she does anyway as her head turns to peer at her mate and son.

Junhyun has never been the violent brutish kind of man. He is not harsh or strict like Dahee. He is all that is sweet, tender and full of a patience and understanding that very few can muster. Yet, his words are laced with a cold viciousness now, full of a resolution that echoes with Dahee's, and that enlivens Taehyung.

Junhyun speaks of Jungkook's possible death and promises blood as a result of it. He promises vengeance as well, whether when they find Jungkook, days, weeks or months later. It aids Taehyung. It must placate him because his respiration evens out the more Junhyun speaks. Junhyun rasps a *'Blood for blood'* last on Taehyung's crown where he presses a kiss there before turning around.

Taehyung's eyes are those of his counterpart like they have been since the disappearance. The pupil is thinned at the center, drowned by the turbulent gold in them. Dahee commends her son's restraint.

Jungkook's disappearance has carved a gash within Taehyung, one that has bled and bled and *bled and—*

It stops.

The blood of the wound is kept into lull.

It's smothered by the intangible hand of Taehyung's chaos that Dahee can nearly see enveloping Taehyung's form, gaze and arcane as a whole. It must feed onto the heartbreak, finding a fare in the pain and loneliness.

Junhyun walks up to her.

His hand grips onto her side as they both utter the address on the leaf.

Dahee has never been the kind to pray. She does not believe in any deity, nor in the Elders' superiority many dragonborns rely on. However, as her skin pebbles with goosebumps in reaction to Taehyung's arcane, as the primal urge to be away from her own son — *from danger* — rises within her, she prays.

She prays to find Jungkook alive, lest her son gives truth to his own tales.

Jimin waits until Dahee and Junhyun are gone to pluck a glass that he fills with water, now left alone with Taehyung. He peers over his shoulder at Taehyung who has not budged from where he's folded over the kitchen island. "How are you feeling?"

"Like… Like I'm having a slow heart attack. Since he's gone."

Jimin recalls how similar he had felt when he had broken up with Yeonho. He thinks he had nearly died that day when he had found the one he had considered as his mate in bed with someone else. The anger had been absent, replaced instead by a deep sense of loss and grief. If it hadn't been for

Taehyung and Minsoo who had aided Jimin back then, Jimin doesn't think he would have survived the heartbreak.

Jimin surveys Taehyung.

He hasn't been able to see Taehyung much for the past six days.

Taehyung had asked Jimin to stay with Revna, a request Jimin had complied to, both for Taehyung's sake but also Minsoo's.

Minsoo had taken everyone aside at some point to warn them of what would need to be done about Taehyung and his reaction to Jungkook's abduction. Minsoo had said that he needed to be left alone with Taehyung to be able to freely use his arcane on him and mitigate the latter's symptoms of broken heart syndrome.

Jimin had protested at first, thinking that Minsoo had been overreacting. However Minsoo had begun to list the health issues that he had detected within Taehyung the day of the disappearance: irregular heartbeats and palpitation, weakened heart muscles and low blood pressure.

Jimin had not questioned Minsoo's demand after this.

Jimin slides the glass toward Taehyung. "Drink."

Taehyung wipes his eyes and nose with the rim of his shirt. Saying that he looks like a mess would be putting it mildly, but there's also a certain haziness in his gaze, a residual of whatever medicine Minsoo has given to Taehyung.

Taehyung drinks half of his water before putting the glass down.

"I won't tell you that we'll find him, or that he's alive or give you any kind of false promises, but I'll follow you." Jimin's eyes find Taehyung's distant ones. "Doesn't matter for what. I'll follow you. You know that."

Taehyung nods, his gaze evading. "We should leave."

"Why don't you take a quick shower? The spell isn't over yet, so we've got a few hours to spare."

Taehyung visibly hesitates.

"I don't think Jungkook would appreciate a husband reeking the way you do," Jimin jests even if he knows that Jungkook would not care, but the remark ebbs away some of the tenseness in Taehyung's shoulders.

"Shut up." Taehyung brushes his wedding ring. "I'll go shower."

"Yeah, you do that. I'll clean the mess a bit." Jimin glances at the broken porcelain and pieces of metal scattered across the floor.

"Can I hug you?"

Jimin immediately wraps his arms around Taehyung, feeling like crying a little too. They remain like this for a while, both gorging onto the comfort the other gives them, and Jimin pretends to not feel the way some drops wet the shoulder of his shirt.

“Thank you,” Taehyung whispers and Jimin tweaks his side.

“Not for that, stupid idiot.”

“S’redundant.”

“Shut up.”

“Thank you for staying with Revna and— And I know you care about Jungkook too. It must be frustrating to stay back with her instead of looking for him but… I needed it to be you with her. No one else. I trust the others but—”

“I know.” Jimin breaks the hug to give Taehyung a small smile. “I get it. It’s fine. I mean it.” And he truly does. Staying back had been good for Jimin. He had been able to take care of Revna while helping Yoongi and Hyuna with the spell and speeding the creation process. “I wouldn’t have been able to do much if I had been looking for him with you, and that would have driven me crazy. With Yoongi, I could help a bit more. I even drew the map we’ll be using for the spell,” he smiles and he thinks back on how oddly honored he had been to be allowed to use Yoongi’s ink.

“That’s good,” Taehyung nods and clears his throat. “Gonna shower.”

“Hurry. You smell.”

“Fuck off,” Taehyung says and walks away.

Taehyung’s steps are less heavy, and Jimin sighs to himself in relief.

Taehyung swings the bathroom door open.

Jungkook’s head swivels around. There’s blood soaking a towel and more on his hands. There’s also a dozen dead rodents of all sorts, over half of them cut open or wounded in varying degrees.

“Wh–”

“I can explain.”

“What are you doing?”

“Listen, re—”

“Are these rats?”

“Before you think about divorcing me, let me explain.”

Taehyung’s eyes narrow as he leans against the doorway and crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m all ears.”

“Remember what we said about training my arcane? Well…” Jungkook trails off, a certain nervousness draping over him. “This is what this is. Training.”

“Training by raising a rat from the dead.”

“You’re the one who proposed this back then. And I didn’t hurt them while they were alive. I killed them first.”

“I didn’t think you’d take it literally, let alone do this in our bathroom,” Taehyung says. “For how long have you been at it?”

Jungkook’s scent veers into something sour. “Hours…?”

Taehyung surveys Jungkook who folds his legs under himself, his bold up fists pressed against his thighs.

Jungkook evades Taehyung’s gaze. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d be back home this soon. I meant to clean everything before you arrive. I– Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I was teasing.”

“No I... I'm— I’ll clean everything.” Jungkook begins to gather the rodents’ bodies.

Taehyung fully steps inside the bathroom that he closes the door of. He plops down in front of Jungkook, on the other side of the makeshift rodent graveyard. “Has it led to anything?” When Jungkook does not reply, Taehyung glances up at him.

Jungkook is wiping his eyes with the collar of his shirt, accidentally smearing some blood on his cheek at the same time.

Taehyung internally curses. “Vi—”

“I’m fine.” Jungkook clears his throat and his hands lower to hurriedly fold the towel.

“Viper,” Taehyung reiterates and grabs Jungkook’s wrists. His eyes find Jungkook’s glossy ones. “Everything’s alright, I promise. I was just teasing. I’m not disturbed.”

“It should be disturbing, and I understand if it is.”

“I’m a hunter. Dead rats being butchered won’t be something that’ll bother me.”

A tear passes over Jungkook’s lips. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.” Taehyung releases one of Jungkook’s wrists to pull on his own sleeve and clean the smudge of blood on the apple of Jungkook’s cheek. “You didn’t answer me.”

“Uh?”

“I asked if this experiment led to anything.”

“One day I’ll want to try on humans,” Jungkook blurts out and rips his arm out of Taehyung’s grasp. “I don’t mean that I’ll kill people to see if I can raise them, but I’ll want to experiment with

human bodies and see how I can raise them, and how to handle the consequences if I manage to do so."

"I know."

"You—" Jungkook frowns. "No. You don't know. You're not listening."

"There's an island with a catacomb and healers days of flight away. It's an ice land that is mainly used as a graveyard," Taehyung explains. He had done some research about it after learning that Jungkook can raise the dead, having always assumed that Jungkook would want to train on humans at some point. "The healers are preserving some dragonborn bodies there for organ transplants, for example, or simply to study medicine and create new healing methods, remedies and things like these. Those buried in this place know what their bodies may be used for, and they've agreed to it. So there won't be any… Any immorality if you train your necromancy on them. Plus we–"

Taehyung halts when Jungkook hides his face in the crook of his elbow as an aborted sob tumbles out of his lips.

"M'sorry. I got really scared. I— I thought—" Jungkook's breath hitches. "Thought you'd be mad, or disgusted."

"Why would I be? It's your arcane." Taehyung doesn't think much when he pulls Jungkook's toward him, the latter responding by tentatively wrapping his arms around Taehyung's neck. "I'll never be disgusted by your necromancy."

"Okay."

"I like it. I think it's fascinating."

"Thank you," Jungkook rasps in Taehyung's neck.

"You're welcome." Taehyung doesn't let go of Jungkook until Jungkook himself does minutes later. Taehyung grabs some tissue to wipe Jungkook's eyes then nose. "So, you'll answer me one day or…"

Jungkook emits a wet chuckle as he sniffles. He peers at Taehyung but averts his gaze right after. "Are you really okay with this?"

"I am."

"Then… We'll go to that island one day? To experiment, if I'm allowed to?"

"We will. We can go whenever you want," Taehyung assures and Jungkook nods as he blinks away the new tears that collect in his eyes. "I'm still waiting."

"Well," Jungkook starts then clears his throat, "nothing much happened. I didn't manage to actually raise any of them, but I noticed that my arcane reacts differently depending on how wounded the body is. It's hard to explain, and a bit contradictory, but I think the more the body is wounded, or the older it is, the easier it may be for me to raise them, and hopefully the less impactful it'll be on me?"

Taehyung hums as he leans forward and pulls apart the towel to survey the rodents' corpses. "That's interesting. The size of the body may have a role to play in this as well."

"Yes, maybe. I was thinking the same. But I'm not really sure."

"What about arcane? Do you think it'll change something if you try to raise a dead dragonborn? Or a warlock?"

"Probably? I know arcane can remain with some lost souls. I can't smell or fully sense arcane like you do, but I can still feel its presence sometimes."

"I see. Perhaps we could…"

The travel pulls at a weird part in Taehyung's stomach and tears him out of the memory replaying in his mind. He can still remember the way Jungkook had smiled that day, and how he had been clinging onto Taehyung afterward.

Taehyung finds himself standing in Hyuna's home moments later.

His nerves feel raw, too exposed after what has happened at his parents' house. No one makes any mention of this, thankfully, and Taehyung joins the group crowding a round table.

His gaze drifts on Revna who's curled onto a smaller table. She hisses when she notices Taehyung's presence and Taehyung crouches in front of her. She loosely curls around his arm when he reaches her and Taehyung brushes the sigil on her head then caresses her crown. "Everything alright?"

Revna makes a click of her tongue that Taehyung reads as one of affirmation before bumping her snout against his cheek.

"The spell will be completed in a few hours," Hyuna says, dressed in a thin robe. Her hair is pulled up on her head in a bun, sweat trickling down her neck.

"You need to rest," Hoseok intervenes but Hyuna waves him off.

"Rest can wait." Hyuna reaches for an object with her prosthetic arm that is adorned with carvings of flowers, all more colorful than the others. "Taehyung, angel."

Taehyung straightens up as Revna finds her place on the table again.

Hyuna marches up to him. "We are close to him," she declares and cups Taehyung's face.

"What if the spell doesn't work?"

"Then we will find another way," Hyuna affirms. "However I have faith in Yoongi and I's abilities."

"What does the spell entail, exactly?" Taehyung walks back to the table after one more pet on Revna's head, her presence reassuring.

“We’ve managed to trace the bond tethering Revna to Jungkook. The issue is that it abruptly cuts on Jungkook’s end,” Hyuna explains. “However it *is* there.”

“Meaning that Jungkook is alive,” Yoongi supplies while tinkering with some vials of ink.

“Exactly.” Hyuna smiles and Taehyung wishes that he could share the hope that floats through the room, but he can’t afford to yet. “Our angel is still very much alive. The spell won’t track the bond itself, but rather where the cut on Jungkook’s end is. Jimin raised this idea. He believes that the reason why the cut is so clear and sudden is because there may be some kind of wall shielding Jungkook from us.”

“So if we locate that wall—”

“We locate Jungkook,” Taehyung finishes for Jimin, feeling a little breathless.

“Yes.” Hyuna tries to grab a contraption, however it slips from the fingers of her prosthetic arm. Hoseok’s quick reflexes save it from crashing down. “Apologies.”

“Rest for a bit,” Hoseok instructs. He ignores Hyuna’s protests to guide her toward a chair and prompt her to settle down.

It’s easy to tell that Hyuna is scared. Her fear is one that Taehyung relates to, and so he says “We won’t let the man with the scent get to you again.” Hyuna peers at him. “I’ve had members of my hunting squadron stationed in Eden ever since what happened at the manor.”

Hyuna looks surprised. “I never noticed.”

“They weren’t meant to be noticed.” Taehyung trudges toward her. He gives her a pair of bracelet and ring, the same one everyone has been wearing. “Yoongi made these for us a while ago. They have a tracker in them and the ring works like an S.O.S message as well. All you’ve got to do is press on the gem.”

“Oh,” Hyuna breathes out and extends her real hand to take the trinkets. “Thank you, angel.”

“There’s also this I want you to take.” Taehyung presents one of his scales that he had plucked earlier this week from the wings of his human form. “It’s infused with my arcane. You told me a couple days ago that you have a plant allowing you to pull on someone’s arcane, right?”

“I do. She sends a prickle through the object suffused with the person’s arcane, so to say.”

“So if anything happens, you can use that plant to pull on my arcane, and I’ll feel it?”

“Let me reassure you that it is nothing invasive at all. I will not know where you are, nor anything as such at all. It simply works like a string where we both hold onto one end.”

“Then keep it with you.” Taehyung deposits his scale on her table. “You can use it any time, for any kind of reason. I’ll just need more of your transportation leaves so that I can immediately come here. I’ve been trying my best to ensure your safety after what he did to you, and I’m relieved to see it has all gone well, but… If he’s behind Jungkook’s abduction, we need to be more careful.”

“I will.” Hyuna's hand trembles where it curls around Taehyung’s scale.

Taehyung crouches in front of her. He gently cups her prosthetic hand, the metal cold under his fingers. “He’ll die one day. I promise you. And you’ll be the first one I’ll tell and celebrate with.”

Hyuna wetly chuckles and briefly hugs Taehyung before she relents seconds later. “Enough about me. We must find my sweet angel. We’ll need a few hours to finalize the spell and ensure that everything works well.”

“How risky will it be?”

“It depends on what you mean by ‘risky’,” Yoongi answers.

The muscles of Taehyung’s jaw jump. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“There’s risky in the sense of pain, and risky in the sense of death.”

“Which one does this spell fall into?”

“Both.”

Taehyung doesn’t bother muffling the staccato that rumbles in his breath pouch. “Tell me.”

“The spell will locate whatever wall that is hiding Jungkook, but to do this we have to enter the bond. Invade it. Arcanic bonds don’t like this,” Yoongi explains. “It’ll be painful for both Jungkook and Revna.”

“Even Jungkook will feel it?”

Yoongi nods. “His position is concealed, but he's still inside the bond. The pain will be excruciating. What's especially risky is that Jungkook could be fighting when the spell starts, and the pain could get in the way.”

“We don't have another way for now,” Jimin says.

“The pain is the least problematic part. The worst is the toll it may take on the bond. It could shatter,” Hyuna sighs and brushes Revna’s face when the latter makes a whining hiss. “Jungkook and Revna may not survive the destruction of their bond.”

“So either they kill him or *we* kill him,” Taehyung summarizes. His nails bite into the flesh of his folded arms. “For fuck’s sake.”

Taehyung falls quiet for a moment as everyone else discusses the spell along with any other option. However Taehyung can see that Yoongi and Hyuna have made their decision. Revna too, her attention not straying away from the map.

Taehyung approaches her again and lowers to meet her gaze. “Do you want to do it, Rev?”

Revna hisses once, a resolute *‘Yes’* that translates in her eyes.

“Let’s get ready and finalize the preparations,” Yoongi says. “The next hours will be crucial.”

Jungkook has tried to sneak out of the house hours into the night, however he was met with one of the lizard's lullabies that had promptly put him to sleep. He has also thought of talking his way out of his prison, but Yumi is…

Yumi.

She's stubborn and has refused to listen to any proposal Jungkook may have presented to her.

Shaping his behavior, his words and demeanor had been easy for Jungkook with Seungwon. Everyone always has *something*, some kind of weakness Jungkook can work with and capitalize on. Even Dohyun does, like the latter's 'love' for Taehyung.

Jungkook hasn't managed to find anything with Yumi.

Her goals and aspirations are too simplistic. She does not nurse any loyalty for anyone and even herself.

So Jungkook has yet to find a way out.

The others are looking for him, at least. Taehyung is. Jungkook suspects that there are perhaps runes or an arcanic trinket shrouding him or this house from Yoongi's tracker.

Jungkook still doesn't have his wedding ring.

His ring finger feels naked, so does his neck where the pendant and ruby would usually be.

He has barely slept and eaten for the past six days. Half because of the anxiousness of being surrounded by the cryptic warlock. Half due to the pain in his ribs that is still throbbing and keeping him awake.

Jungkook has a lot of free time to think and ruminate regarding what he has learned about Revna days ago.

Revna is a dragonborn, and a plethora of new questions have erupted in Jungkook's mind. None have found their answers yet. He tries to reach for Revna in their bond, but he can't quite grasp it.

"It's ready."

Taehyung springs to his feet, a tad drowsy from the impromptu nap he's taken while waiting for Yoongi and Hyuna to complete the preparations of the spell. He notices that the day has well advanced in the afternoon.

He glances at Revna.

She has runes drawn all over her body, some red and other greens and it's runes Taehyung has never seen before, most likely invented for the spell. He cradles her head with a hand to graze his

thumb on her sigil and he bumps his nose against her snout in an encouraging motion that Revna reciprocates.

“It’ll be fine, alright? If you want to stop, you bite on this or touch it to make a sound.” Taehyung points at the bell resting next to Revna on the table where she’s settled.

Revna nudges Taehyung’s hand, her tongue darting out in a kiss, then she moves away from him to curl into a tight ball.

Taehyung joins the others at the table, the group circling the large map stretched before them.

“Is there anything specific we need to do?” Seokjin asks.

“Aside from keeping an eye on the map, no,” Yoongi answers. He spills the content of a vial of red ink on the map. The ink vanishes seconds later.

“If the spell locates something, the red ink will form dots on the map. You won’t be able to miss them,” Hyuna says. “The hardest part for us is done. The next one will be strenuous on Jungkook and Revna.”

A restlessness thrums through Taehyung but he hides it as he peers at Revna again. She looks nervous too, her scent a tad sour and Taehyung musters a small smile that she nods at.

Hyuna grabs an odd flower that appears to be made of ink. She presents it to Revna who opens her mouth and swallows the plant in one go. Yoongi murmurs to himself in the meantime, something that Taehyung can’t decipher, however it prompts the ink to swirl out of his finger and tether Revna to the map in a thread. The outlines of Aurora’s continent and its countries, islands and other lands all begin to undulate, as though alive.

“Ready?” Yoongi says to Revna.

Revna stills herself.

Everyone else in the room does too, including Taehyung who’s framed by Minsoo and Jimin.

All at once, Hyuna’s arcane suffuses the room like it had when Taehyung and Jungkook had visited her for the first time. The plants and flowers attached on the walls or resting on shelves all quiver and sway from side to side.

It goes on for a while, the minutes trickling one by one.

Then, it stops.

Taehyung watches the way the runes on Revna’s body begin to pulsate. Something of a deep red lightens somewhere high up her chest, as if she has swallowed a red firefly. The carmine expends like tendrils, seemingly running through her veins.

A silence stretches within the group.

It’s torn by a strangled hiss.

Revna writhes on the table. She whines and cries and Taehyung has to tune her out to focus on the map lest he puts a halt to the spell.

Taehyung’s eyes dart across the inked parchment. It jumps from country to village to a small town, waiting to catch red ink.

Nothing can be seen.

Jungkook jerks awake with such an excruciating pain that he feels sick from it, heaving as it spreads through his limbs from his chest. His airways are stifled, his body locked. His arms strains to raise to his chest and the gasp that had been stuck in his throat eventually escapes. Tears well up in his eyes and begin to spill down his temple from where he’s laid on the bed.

Jungkook groans. He grips his shirt, wondering if he’s perhaps dying all of a sudden. The pain doesn’t come from his ribs. It’s too abrupt and acute.

It’s as though someone is stripping a raw nerve within him that seems to be seconds away from snapping in half.

A sob tumbles out of his mouth. He coughs as he moves on his side then on his knees, folded over himself. There’s a metallic taste on his tongue and when he coughs a second time, blood splatters on the bed sheet.

He distantly hears the door open.

“Oh. What is happening here?” It’s Yumi who pauses next to him. “Aaah, are they trying to locate you? They shouldn’t be able to do so,” she hums and she brings out an object Jungkook can’t make out through his tears. “It physically wounds you from a distance. Huh. That’s odd. I’ve removed all of your belongings but…”

A hand touches Jungkook’s face that he shuffles away from. A heat blazes through him that heightens when he tumbles out of the bed to crash down on the floor. He coughs some more, each one bloody.

“How can they physically reach you like this? Did you leave a trinket behind suffused with a large amount of your arcane?”

Jungkook wants to claw his chest. Maybe the pain will be less, then. “G—God. This—”

“Aaah… Is it your basilisk, maybe?”

Jungkook does not answer. Both because he can’t but also should not. He leans forward and braces himself on his forearm, his fingers balled into fists he can’t relax. Perspiration blooms on his skin, some drops joining those of blood.

"They may be using her to find you. That would certainly explain the pain and also the fact that they’re half killing you,” Yumi says, confirming Jungkook’s suspicions. “Even then, they shouldn’t be able to find this place.” She heaves a petulant sigh. “Ah… This won’t do.” She tuts, her footsteps growing louder and pausing on Jungkook’s left. “No one is supposed to know this place exists. Let’s move somewhere else.”

“Do you see anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Fuck.”

“Focus,” Dahee interjects. “It must work.”

“Is this a spell that can be done a second time?” Someone asks.

“No. A second attempt would destroy the bond *or* kill them.”

Taehyung does his best to focus on his task but he can’t repress the glances he throws in Revna’s direction. His eyes widen when he catches the blood that trickles out of her mouth as she heaves. Some liquid seeps from in-between her scales. More blood.

Taehyung’s throat clicks when he swallows. He stares back at the map. He can’t help but think about how Jungkook is experiencing the spell on his side. Taehyung worries they may worsen any potentially wound.

Taehyung still clings onto the sliver of hope.

He leans forward on his hands. He counts the seconds in his head.

50…

51…

52…

Nothing in Vanae.

82…

83…

84…

Nothing in Amaris.

110…

111…

112…

Nothing in Seungwon’s land or at the Seven Isles.

238…

239…

24—

It’s at the fourth minute mark that red appears on the map.

“There!”

Fifteen different dots are scattered across the map.

Not a single blink tears through Taehyung’s concentration.

“This doesn’t help at all.”

“Why are they all scattered around?”

“Fucking hell. This can’t be it.” Yoongi curses again. “Jungkook can’t be both in Amaris and Vanae and in the Emerald Sea and even in the middle of the damn ocean.”

Jungkook hopes that the others are aware of the impact the spell has on him because he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to survive it for much longer.

So Jungkook has to remain where he is somehow. He can’t afford to let Yumi transport him to another place that may lead astray those looking for him.

Jungkook is on his back, Yumi above him. He kicks her in the stomach, sending her to topple backward. He springs to his feet and everything tilts around when he does. His steps are unsteady as he walks, but he manages to stagger out of the bedroom.

He doesn’t really understand what happens at first, blinded by the scorching pain, but one moment his foot drags across wood, then nothing.

Jungkook falls down the stairs. His teeth clench when a both dull and acute throe bursts everywhere in him. He stands with difficulty. He sees a knife on the kitchen counter. Jungkook crosses the distance but his legs are too weak to carry him very far.

He still manages to grab the knife.

He feels a presence behind him.

Jungkook swivels around with the blade that Yumi deftly dodges.

It doesn’t take much for Yumi to trip Jungkook who tumbles on his rear. She plants a knee on his side, right where his wounded ribs are while she grabs his wrist.

Jungkook shouts and it hurts. *Everything hurts.* His muscles slacken around the knife.

Yumi takes it away.

“My dear! A door to the second house, please!”

Jungkook blearily watches the familiar spit out a door.

“Why are there so many of them?”

“I don’t know.”

More dots appear on the map and it does not stop as soon dozens upon dozens of red specks crowd the parchment.

“They’re all over the place. It’d take years to scour everything and we’d have to make Jungkook’s disappearance pub—”

“I think they’re covering up the actual location,” Taehyung realizes. “Whatever spell or rune hiding Jungkook’s location must have a layer in them that allows to create decoys to protect it from scouring spells.” Revna is still writhing and crying but she has yet to touch the bell, and Taehyung trusts her to do so when it becomes too much.

The dozens of dots blink in and out of Aurora’s map, like some kind of irregular red firework.

Taehyung observes Vanae first, focusing on this land. Nothing peculiar can be noticed about the dots there. So his gaze flickers on the series of islands at the east of Vanae.

Taehyung frowns.

He shoves Jimin and Namjoon aside to have a better view of the map.

Taehyung notices something, and he tunes everyone out. At first, he believes it’s in his mind, that it’s just the hope wanting to grasp onto something to remain alive. However the more he looks, the more he notices it: a pattern.

There is a dot that follows the same trail every time, unlike the others that spawn haphazardly. It starts on an island, then blinks outward, before reappearing on the starting point again. It isn’t the only one. More of the speckles follow a similar rhythm but they’re hard to notice amidst the sea of erratic speckles.

Taehyung grabs a pen. He traces the line the dot makes, then another, and more, and it takes him some time to detect which dot follows a pattern and which one does not, but he figures it out once he knows what to look for.

The more Taehyung delineates, the more he notices that the rhythmic dots pulsate outward. Kind of like waves, Taehyung realizes.

They all start from the exact same location: one of the islands on the east of Vanae.

A bell rings in the room then clatters on the ground.

“Stop the spell,” Taehyung orders.

“But we—”

“Stop it!” Taehyung drops the pen to rush toward Revna.

The arcane that had been flowing through the room vanishes.

Revna is panting, the carmine tendrils gone from inside her body and so is the pulsating sphere in her chest. Taehyung crouches in front of her and he cradles her head in his palms. “You did so well. It’s done. Thank you, Lovely. You’re fine now, breathe. Everything’s fine.”

Revna tries to coil around Taehyung’s arms but she’s too weakened, not even able to keep her head up. Taehyung takes the wet cloth Hyuna hands to him and he brushes it over Revna’s scales, wiping off the blood as best he can.

“That…” Jimin pauses. “That didn’t help at all.”

“The dots were all over the fucking place. Shit. Fuck!” Yoongi paces around. “It’s impossible to check every single one of them and we can’t redo this spell.”

“I think I saw something.” Taehyung lets Hyuna continue his task of cleaning Revna to walk back to the map. “I found six dots pulsating outward from this island," he says and circles it.

“I have not noticed anything,” Dahee says.

Everyone else echoes her, and Taehyung worries that it may have all been in his head after all.

“I—I saw something,” Taehyung reiterates but his conviction falters.

“Are you certain, Son? There were dozens of dots.”

Taehyung peers at his father then back at the map.

They may have a lead for the first, and Taehyung *has* to follow it.

“There was a pattern. Six dots. As I said, the other dots must work as a decoy.”

“We can’t try this spell again anyway, right?” Hoseok says.

Revna whines at the mention and Taehyung’s heart clenches.

“It’s too risky,” Yoongi sighs. He clicks his tongue and his hard gaze flutters on Taehyung. He’s quiet for a moment before he says “We should follow the lead Taehyung found. You said on this island?” Yoongi asks and taps on the sketched land.

Taehyung nods.

“And if we found nothing?”

“We’ll look somewhere else.”

“Let’s leave now. Revna should stay back with you,” Taehyung says to Hyuna. “We need to bring Insung, Yeji and Mira as well. There’s a series of underground tunnels on this island. Some of them

are filled with water. We'll need their help."

"The bags over there are full of transporting leaves. Enhanced ones and with different properties written on the note," Hyuna says and nods toward a dozen tissue bags lined on a desk.

"Revna?"

Taehyung peers in Revna's direction.

He watches as Revna's body convulses. It contracts and relaxes once as she heaves some liquid on the table. Her head falls limp in Hyuna's palm, unconscious.

Taehyung quickly marches toward them.

There's already blood on the table from Revna scales, but also from the pool she regurgitated because Taehyung can smell the metallic tint to it. However it is the only indication that it has some blood.

The puddle is entirely *black.*

"What the fuck?"

"What is that?"

"Is that her poison?" Namjoon asks. "Or the ink?"

"No." It's too dense to be ink or poison, Taehyung muses. He takes a pen to probe at the dark puddle. There's something in it. Several of them, he notices. He lifts one of them.

It's thin and round when Taehyung spreads it on the table. It looks like—

"A petal," Taehyung says.

"What?"

Taehyung forsakes the pen. When he pinches the petal with his thumb and index, black tendrils crawl up his hand and veins. "It's a nix petal. From the raven bell."

The pain abates as abruptly as it had started.

Jungkook has a fist raised above Yumi's head from where he's straddling her. There's a knife placed under his chin, the acute point nipping at the skin. The arcanic door is opened next to him.

He hasn't passed a single finger through it yet.

"Oh." Yumi looks up at Jungkook. She must notice the tension that leaves Jungkook's form because she groans and spreads her arms, the knife falling from her grasp. "Their spell is over, isn't it?" She pushes Jungkook off herself to stand while Jungkook remains where he's laid. "This sucks."

The knife is too far for Jungkook to take it without alerting Yumi. So he remains where he is and stares at the warlock.

There's a sudden lack of emotion on Yumi's face. Her gaze is distant, as if she isn't fully there anymore and has fleetingly left the present moment. She's eerily immobile too and she does not budge when her lizard climbs up her leg to sit down on her head.

Jungkook warily surveys her as he catches his breath, a hand pressed to his aching side.

Yumi blinks once then shakes her head. She tuts. "I still hoped to bait them somewhere other than here before the spell ends, but you had to be annoying, uh?" She glances at Jungkook. "This was not part of the plan, you know."

Jungkook sits up while Yumi begins to clean up the aftermath of their brief brawl.

"You were supposed to stay here for a few more days, then I was supposed to send you back to Vanae once my familiar had recuperated enough to create a door this far."

"What now?" Jungkook asks.

Fighting her will be much easier without the pain.

"Now, they may have located this island. We should leave, but it's pointless if they already know you're here. That means I can't keep this house anymore. I hate this," Yumi grumbles but perks up seconds later. "Although…" She peers at Jungkook with a smile that does not reach her eyes. "They may know we're on this island, but they'll never be able to find this place, let alone enter it."

"Why?"

"Well!" Yumi claps her hand, ignoring Jungkook's question. "We will be busy for a few days while they travel here. I need to prepare for the move out and get all my stuff to my second house." She grabs a paper bag full of caramelized candies that she begins to snack on. "Let's get to work."

"I'll rest." Jungkook lays back down in the middle of the living room.

Yumi kicks his leg. "Help me if you don't want me to send us away from here."

"Why aren't you to begin with?"

"Because I don't intend to keep you forever with me. At least not like this. I want you to be back with them. I simply needed it to be on *my* terms, and certainly not here. But it's too late now."

"You're insane."

"It comes with our arcane, does it not?" Yumi grins.

Yeah, Jungkook would be inclined to agree.

"Oh I'm excited now. I wonder if they'll even realize we're actually here, and if yes, I'd like to see how they'll try to get to us!" Yumi shoves a mouthful of the snacks in her mouth before tossing the empty bag above her shoulder. "Chop chop! A thunder is coming our way! We must prepare for its arrival!"

Chapter End Notes

See you right away for the second part/chapter!! Feel free to comment on this chapter or the next one (or both if you love me and would like to feed me 😌) since it was supposed to be one big chap 🥺🤍

❧ Twitter

— Character's visuals —

Yumi

Chapter 24: A Dragon's Heartbreak II

Chapter Summary

Two lonely chaos find their peace again.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the second part hehe 🫶🤍 And thank you veeery much to Sisi and Nach for helping me with this chap and holding my hand throughout the writing of it 😭🤍

Song recommendations:

!!Play this song starting "The downpour is slowly ebbing away, becoming more of a drizzle now." up until the end of that scene

1) Badass playlist for the scene starting at “Junhyun flies, casting a vast shadow over Taehyung…” (starting from the song Ludex Gundyr to The Last Giant):Youtube playlist, Spotify playlist
2) General soft playlists: playlist 1, playlist 2, playlist 3
3) Playlist for the scene starting at ““No.” Taehyung would rather still have…”: song (I had this one in LOOP), bonus playlist

❧ Twitter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Insung and Yeji will focus on the underwater searches since they’re both water dragons,” Taehyung starts. “There are several caves I’ve marked on the maps. The rest of us will focus on the ground. We’ll fully comb the island right from the get go.”

“It’ll take a while,” Jimin says with a worried frown.

“Several days.” *Weeks,* Taehyung thinks to himself. “The island is huge, but we can’t afford making Jungkook’s abduction public, especially since some of you raised the idea that the man with the scent may not be behind it.”

“Hopefully Seungwon didn’t run his mouth too much…”

“We’ll see once we get on the island how we’ll split up and proceed with the searches. Jungkook is —” The rest of Taehyung's words die on his tongue. He folds the parchment where he has drawn the map of the island to have something to do with himself and be detracted from the palpitations of his heart. “He has to be there.”

“We trust you, my son.” Dahee squeezes his shoulder. “You saw something. It is a clue we will explore.”

“Yeah.” Taehyung surveys Revna, the latter unconscious and resting on a pillow.

“I’ll take care of her,” Hyuna assures but Taehyung worries anyway. “I’ll also make sure she doesn’t consume any nixes.”

“Why would she do that?” Taehyung sighs.

“One thing at a time, kid,” Minsoo interjects. “First the island and Jungkook. The rest can wait.”

Taehyung nods. “Still try to see if you can find anything interesting about the raven bell. And keep your eyes on her, please. You can use my scale if anything happens and I’ll immediately come here. She— She may want to eat something. She likes meat and potatoes. She should drink too, since she puked. And she likes warm places, so if you have any blankets that’d be nice, but if not it’s fine.”

“Duly noted, angel.” Hyuna smiles. “She’s in good hands with me.”

“You need to rest as well. You’ve done a lot for us,” Taehyung says and holds the hand Hyuna extends toward him. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Her and I will both rest.”

Taehyung nods and turns toward the rest of the group. “We need to leave.”

It’ll still take hours of flight to cross the ocean and reach the island, but Taehyung comforts himself with the fact that they now have a proper lead to follow.

Taehyung tries to put a bottle of water in his bag but it falls out of his trembling hand. He bends to grab it but someone precedes him.

“You are doing great, Son,” Junhyun says and stores the bottle for Taehyung. “No matter what happens, we will not intervene.”

“That’d be great. ‘Cause I don’t want to have to have to worry about everyone else on top of everything.”

“You won’t.”

Taehyung inhales and exhales through his mouth.

Three in, five out.

In, and out.

An uncanny, deep-seated calm slowly takes over his mind as he fastens his bag shut.

The tremors dissipate.

He’s uncertain of what awaits them. If Jungkook is alive or not, if he’s wounded or not, if he will be on the island to begin with. However there is an objective that everything within Taehyung narrows onto.

“Let’s move.”

Taehyung and everyone else take a leaf, transporting them out of Hyuna’s home moments later.

The group arrives inside a small hut.

The first matter that catches Taehyung’s attention is the scent of salt and something fresh that can only be described as the sea.

They step out of the hut to walk into the sand.

After some quick discussion, Dahee and Mira shift to their dragon self. They’re the fastest fliers and so the others remain in their human form to settle on the dragon’s back and in their talons.

The flight to the island is long.

It feels like it stretches for days.

Taehyung is settled in his mother’s front talon, unable to do anything aside from waiting. The storm still drapes over them but Taehyung has managed to lessen it to a thin drizzle to avoid impeding the flight.

Jungkook has been gone for exactly 152 hours, 157 hours after the flight.

It’s been well over six days.

The island is vast as they approach it, Taehyung unable to see where it begins or ends.

Dahee and Mira land, the others climbing down their back and talons, Taehyung one of them. The night has started by now. The sky has significantly darkened, so much so that it will impede their searches if they were to start them now.

“We should begin at dawn,” Dahee suggests.

“Yeah.” Taehyung leads the group inside the dense forest that he doesn’t know by heart but has explored in the past during some expeditions. “We need to rest as well.” He drops his bag at a small clearing that will serve as a temporary place to set up camp. He gathers some wood that he piles up at the center and after creating some kind of wind umbrella to protect the area from the rain, he lightens the wood with the flick of a small fireball.

“Should we not be discreet?” Jimin worries.

“If they’re here, they know we are too. It’s pointless to hide,” Taehyung remarks. “I’ll take the first watch.”

“If anything, you should sleep, Son.”

“I’m gonna scout the area a bit before that.”

“Taeh—”

“I need to move and do something. I’ll rest after,” Taehyung snips.

“Understood.” Dahee pecks Taehyung’s temple. “Let us eat, if so. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

The group rapidly sets camp and lays down the few blankets Hyuna has lent to them. They begin to eat and chat together, but Taehyung refuses the offer to join, instead turning to his dragon self and flying off.

The moonlight is concealed by the clouds, making it even more difficult to see anything. He does spot a cascade not too far from the camp but nothing else in particular, and after a couple hours of flight, he comes back to the group.

Everyone else is huddling on the blankets, all fast asleep aside from Yoongi who’s settled on a rock.

Taehyung lands and grabs some pieces of meat. He plops down on a tree stump near Yoongi.

“Anything?” Yoongi inquires and Taehyung shakes his head. “I didn’t catch anything about the dots. My arcane and Hyuna’s didn’t either.”

“I did. It wasn’t in my head.”

“I hope so.”

Taehyung isn’t upset by Yoongi’s distrust. He understands. They may be wasting time on this island. “It reminded me of some hunts.”

“How so?”

“Some prey we hunt scatter scents everywhere to lead us astray and overwhelm our noses. Most of the dots felt like that, as if they were hiding those pulsating outward from this island.”

“Is this the approach you have on this?”

“Uh?”

“A hunt?”

Hunting, tracking, capturing... It's familiar. It's years of honed skills that he can rely on, and Taehyung understands why he has been more levelheaded. “I guess.”

“You care for him.”

Taehyung scoffs. “No shit.”

“You genuinely do.”

“So what?” Taehyung glares at Yoongi.

“I’m surprised," Yoongi shrugs. "I noticed how much closer you and Jungkook had gotten, but I didn’t realize it was to this extent.”

“Anyone would care if their husband was abducted in front of their fucking eyes.”

“Even if said someone is part of the race that has once tortured you?”

The muscles of Taehyung’s jaw tightens as his teeth grit together. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Does it really not?”

“Jungkook is… He’s Jungkook.” Taehyung feels stupid but he can’t begin to fathom, let alone express what Jungkook represents to him. “ *He* didn't hurt me, and he’s not even human anyway. He’s a damn viper.”

“Fair enough,” Yoongi chuckles. “What about Namjoon and I?”

Taehyung finishes his bowl of rice before responding. “It’s whatever.”

“Are you scared of us? Of me?”

Taehyung doesn’t have to ponder for long. “No. Namjoon’s not too bad, he’s just a skittish nerd. You’re annoying though, but bearable.”

“Well, I’m certainly a lot more bearable than you are."

“Fuck off,” is all that Taehyung says before resuming his meal that he consumes within minutes.

A silence settles between them afterwards that Yoongi breaks.

“You know it’s not your fault, right? What happened.”

Taehyung props his chin in his hand and peers at the ground. “I should have caught him. I didn’t.”

“And I should have too. I know where you’re coming from, and trust me, the guilt was eating at me before I talked to Jimin and Namjoon, but it’s not— It’s not our fault, and Jungkook knows this. He won’t think we failed him.”

“We did though.”

“No. We’d be failing him if we weren't looking for him, but we are, and he’s also aware of this,” Yoongi retorts. “His mind is… After all he has gone through in his life, he has grown strong, his mind even more.”

“Still.”

“Yeah.”

Taehyung yawns and rubs the exhaustion from his eyes.

“You need to sleep. You may miss out on important clues about Jungkook’s whereabouts if you're not well rested.”

Taehyung clicks his tongue. “I know that. Don’t patronize me.”

“Jungkook isn’t here to do so for now. Someone has to take that spot until he’s back.”

Taehyung peers at Yoongi who looks back at him without any kind of anger. If anything, his gaze is kind, like he understands how Taehyung feels, and Yoongi must in some ways.

Taehyung doesn’t sleep yet. He stays with Yoongi for a little longer, not minding the warlock’s quiet companionship, and Yoongi doesn’t seem to mind Taehyung’s either. Yoongi even creates some kind of dragon ink figurine and a raven one that bites off the head of the dragon.

“You’re a fucking child,” Taehyung mutters and ignores Yoongi’s snort.

When Taehyung eventually goes to sleep, he lays down next to Jimin. Jimin does not say a word. Instead he claps his and Taehyung’s hand together as they would always do, and Taehyung’s lids fall shut.

Jungkook is settled on the couch, too winded to climb up the stairs.

Yumi is singing a song as she continues to move her belongings out of this house and through the arcanic door that is opened on a garden and much smaller abode. The lizard is also humming and it has not stopped once for the past hours. The harmonious lullaby quivers through the air, both quiet yet resounding, high-pitched yet deep.

Jungkook had questioned Yumi about it but she had deflected the inquiry with a ramble about a different subject.

“Do we still have a deal? You take me to Kaiya, and I leave you be.”

“Sure.” Jungkook peers at the rock familiar that has been feasting on more corpses that Yumi brings from the basement.

“More conviction would be reassuring,” Yumi complains through a pout.

“You shouldn’t ask *me* if I’m fine with it. I am. I want to know more about necromancy, and perhaps look for my mother.”

“Then who should I ask?”

“You know who." Jungkook peers at Yumi. "Begs the question of whether or not you will even have the time to utter a word.”

Yumi huffs and crouches to push a box through the arcanic door. “Even he can’t do much against her,” she says with a nod toward the lizard.

“He had against the Council.”

“Oh, Jungkook.” Yumi tilts her head backward to peer at him. “I have not once used my arcane at its full potential. I never do.” She peers ahead again. “Taehyung must remember that *I* am the one who enhanced the runes on his shackles and made them powerful enough to seal his arcane. I could do it again. I could even do worse if the mood strikes me. I’m not afraid of him, or of much for that matter.”

“Good for you.” Jungkook closes his eyes, his hands folded over his stomach. He won't sleep. He can't. But he needs to rest and recuperate to prepare for a potential fight.

“You won't try to escape on your own until then? Not that you can, we've been over this, but still.”

“I don't need to. I'll wait for Taehyung.”

“You're putting a lot of faith in his arcane and very little in mine.”

Jungkook lips curl upward. “I trust my husband.”

Taehyung has managed to sleep for a few hours, feeling more rested and present. The rain had grown torrential during his sleep according to his mother, however Taehyung had pacified it to a fine shower after waking up.

“Insung and Yeji, you’re taking care of the underground system,” Taehyung starts, the group gathered in front of him. “Jimin and my mother will handle the cascade and its cave that I found out last night. Yoongi will provide a raven for everyone to use as a communication device in case anything happens. I’ve already segmented the island on the maps I’ve given you. I also wrote down which section each one of us will be scouring. We’ll start from the point we’re at right now and spread outward.”

“How long do you believe it will take us to finish scouting everything?” Namjoon asks.

“A while. This island is a fourth the size of Vanae.”

“Holy shit...”

“Which is why we have to be efficient. When Jungkook fell,” Taehyung says and clears his throat when his voice falters on the last word, “he was high up in the sky. It didn’t click in my head at first, what I had heard, but after seeing the cascade here, I realized that I was hearing the sound of water from the door. He, of course, may not be directly in the cave or near the cascade, but he may not be too far. There are around two more waterfalls from what I remember, so we’ll check these after this one. Any questions?”

“Is there any way for you to stop the rain?” Seokjin asks.

“No.” Taehyung's lips pinch as he peers up at the gray sky. It’s early morning, and the sun would usually bathe them if it wasn’t for his arcane. “I tried but it’s— It has to be out. I can’t fully control my arcane. It’s the best I can do right now.”

Seokjin pats Taehyung’s back. “That’s alright.”

“They wouldn’t be stupid enough to leave traces of Jungkook's scent or passage anywhere anyway,” Jimin adds.

“Definitely not.”

“Let’s not waste another minute.”

The group glances at each other for a moment. Junhyun pecks Dahee while Jimin hugs Yoongi and takes the ink raven that rests on his crown. Hoseok and Seokjin exchange a brief hug as well before patting Namjoon's shoulder and reassuring him.

Taehyung turns away from the group and walks off.

He does not spare them any word or look as he turns to his dragon self and takes off.

"Oh. They're here."

Jungkook's head darts toward Yumi. "What?"

"My lizard can feel them. So they *did* find the island. Isn't that exciting?! I'm surprised they managed to pinpoint this location. We should revise your song," Yumi says to her lizard.

Jungkook sits up.

The pulsations of his heart speeds up.

Jungkook thinks about perhaps making it easier for Taehyung by also looking for a way out, however when the lizard's lullaby shifts to the one that had made him fall asleep within seconds, Jungkook subdues.

"Let's see if they can find you first. It's much more amusing like this, don't you agree?" Yumi says, warning evident in her tone.

Jungkook peers out the window.

The garden is green, the forest surrounding it lush, both lightened by the bright sun in the blue sky.

Taehyung is nearby.

A sense of comfort flows through Jungkook. For once, Jungkook does not have to fight for his life or for a semblance of peace like he had been forced to do under Seohyung's hand.

Someone else is doing it for him.

He's tired. Exhausted, really. He's still in pain from his ribs and bruises that have worsened after the spell the others have seemingly used through his bond with Revna. Jungkook is really, *really* tired. He just wants to sleep and not have anything to do or think about.

He misses his husband and everyone else.

He needs to be home.

The abduction has passed the 171 hours mark.

The group has combed barely half of their designated sections all morning and early afternoon, which is not nearly as much as Taehyung would have wanted.

Nothing was found at the cascade or anywhere yet, and Taehyung's doubts begin to flare up. But Taehyung knows what he has seen. It had to mean something. He just hopes that it has not been the exhaustion playing tricks on his mind.

Taehyung has been adopting a hunting kind of approach. He tracks for scents, any lingering arcane or clue that may lead him somewhere. Every prey leaves something behind no matter what it is, no matter how complex it may be to spot. There must be *something* indicating the presence of a wall hiding Jungkook.

Taehyung scours another section north-east. His wings hurt from the mostly uninterrupted flight. While his stamina is greater than humans and most dragonborns, it does not translate with flying due to his gargantuan dragon form. But Taehyung disregards the ache in his shoulders as his wings bat up and down.

The more Taehyung studies the forest below him, the more uneasy he grows.

Something feels off.

He can't tell how true it is, if it is perhaps wishful thinking, but he trusts his instincts that stand at attention.

He lowers to the canopy. The rain falls around and on him in a light pitter-patter. He sniffs an area but does not catch anything particular.

Why does something feel so off?

He retraces his flight. He periodically pauses or turns to human to investigate on foot. Still nothing. Everything seems normal, and he can't perceive any foreign arcane. Yet there is something unnatural in the area Taehyung has been flying over. However said area is huge, impossible to delineate the borders of.

Taehyung shifts his focus from the flora to the fauna, and understanding slowly sinks in his head.

He hasn't seen a single footprint, heard any bird, hopping bunnies or crawling insects. He could pin it in the storm and the animals sheltering themselves from it, but he should still be able to catch a bird in a tree's crown.

It's eerie.

What is even stranger is how it takes over twenty minutes for Taehyung to finally stumble on a deer's tracks. Taehyung drops down to his human form and follows the tiny pools the deer's hooves dug in the mud. They halt and turn back around in the opposite direction in an abrupt U turn.

Two scenarios are possible: something caught the deer's attention, or something prevented it from continuing its path.

A squeak erupts nearby. Then the sound of tiny paws.

Taehyung swiftly climbs up a tree.

The squirrel darts through the forest and sniffs at the ground. Taehyung follows it, his pants and shirt plastered against his skin. The squirrel sniffs the ground then the air before scurrying away and repeating the pattern. It's looking for food.

It only takes a few minutes for Taehyung to find some hazelnuts.

A tosses a couple a foot away from the squirrel that rushes toward them and stacks them in its mouth. Taehyung throws another near the deer's erasing tracks, then one more where the tracks stop. The squirrel takes the hazelnuts both times. However when Taehyung flicks one beyond the spot where the tracks halted, the squirrel pauses.

It sniffs forward but does not budge. It does not even try to get near the food, as though something is preventing the rodent from doing so.

Taehyung stares for a moment before straightening up and scaring the squirrel away.

He summons his wings and flies around. He finds some sparse insects and another squirrel, but so little considering how luxurious the forest is. He also catches onto some discrepancies in their behavior, how some nocturnal animals are out and about, while others that would enjoy the rain cower away.

Animals are deeply attuned to the Arcanes. They're able to sense its presence when humans, warlocks or dragonborns would not, so Taehyung knows that something is wrong.

"Gather around where I am. Now," Taehyung says to the raven.

Taehyung waits.

Soon, the rest of the group is transported where he is through Hyuna's arcanic leaves.

"I found something," Taehyung blurts out. "Kind of? I'm not certain if it's actually happening or— Or if it's in my head, but I saw how animals avoid certain parts of the forest."

Insung frowns. "Really? I haven't noticed shit."

"Something has been feeling off," Taehyung insists and it sounds harsher than intended but he can feel the dubiousness that runs through the group. "None of you three noticed anything?"

Yeji and Mira peer at each other. "I mean, we did see a lack of animals, but we assumed it was due to the rain."

"Which parts?" Dahee asks.

"Not near the cascade," Taehyung answers. "It's more to the west."

Seokjin hums. "What should we do?"

"Not to be pessimistic," Namjoon starts, "but you've barely been sleeping since Jungkook disappeared. You might be seeing things that aren't there."

“I fucking know that, but I’m a good hunter. It can’t… It can’t just be in my head.” *Right?* “I trust my instincts and they’re telling me something is off. Every animal I’ve encountered has skittish.”

“Maybe because of the rain and your arcane in it. I’m a human and aren’t attuned to the Arcanes, but even I feel tense,” Namjoon says.

It’s a possibility.

Taehyung rubs his hand over his mouth as he thinks back on all that he has seen, and he wonders at once if he has truly lost his mind. “You can just leave. I’ll figure it out on my own.”

"Taehy—"

"For those who want to stay, fly off the ground and stay back. I'm gonna try something."

Taehyung begins to swivel on his feet, an ire coursing through him that he’d rather direct toward something useful instead of on his family.

“Taehyung. Wait.” Jimin’s hand grasps Taehyung’s elbow. “What will you do?”

“If what I saw is correct, then there might be runes like at the manor,” Taehyung explains and peers at Minsoo who frowns. “The first time the man with the scent took me, there were runes hiding me, right?”

“Yeah, but they were detectable,” Minsoo says. “We knew they were here. We could feel them.”

“If there are some here, it’s similar but also completely different and much, much more powerful,” Taehyung carries on. “I think it’s more like a veil here that is draped over an area. There *has* to be something arcanic disturbing the animals. I’ll find out what and I know how, which is why you have to move. You’ll distract me.”

“Will you need help in any way?” Yoongi asks.

“No.”

“We’ll stay nearby. We can afford a few minutes of rest. I’ll fly up, everyone can stay on my back.”

Taehyung is left alone minutes later, the group hovering in the sky.

He goes back to where he had thrown the hazelnuts to the squirrel. He remains in his dragon form, needing the versatility and strength of this form’s vocal chords and organs.

Aside from being Vanae’s future leader and the head of several hunting squadrons, Taehyung has also dedicated years researching the Arcanes and how to implement this knowledge during hunting expeditions.

Sounds are a crucial part of a hunt. They can be used to bait or guide a prey. Taehyung has gone through a lot of trial and error to figure out which frequencies can be heard by which animal, what sound will have what effect on this or that creature.

During one of his researches, Taehyung had found out that arcane can be disturbed by sound. He remembers how back then how his healing breath had been weakened by the screech of a hydra. It had led to all-nighter and more studies.

Taehyung had eventually compiled the results into a book he had given to a research center. This book is still being used in schools and hunting classes to this day, all published as anonymous as Taehyung had never wanted it to be publicly attached to him.

With this knowledge in mind, Taehyung wonders.

Equipped with the full range of his vocalization in his dragon form, Taehyung begins to make some sounds, little clicks of his tongue that resound through his mouth and flicker in the air. Not much occurs. So Taehyung deepens the sounds that become more guttural, coming from the back of his throat.

Something shifts in the air.

It's faint. Barely noticeable.

But Taehyung catches it.

There's some kind of fluctuation in one of the tree's leaves beyond where the hazelnuts and once deer tracks are.

Taehyung's eyes widen as his heart stutters in his chest.

He changes the noises he makes again to more high-pitched whistles. The undulation in the air happens again, this time more evident. Taehyung zeros-in on this, everything else shut out from his mind.

He flies around while continuing his vocalizations. He finds another disturbance farther south, then another west, one more north-east. Soon it turns into a dozen. Then three dozen, four, five and *more.*

It never stops.

He was right.

Taehyung was right.

There *is* something here, and the hope is dizzying, making him stumble in his flight before he finds his balance again.

Through echolocation, Taehyung begins to map out the disturbances he creates in the arcanic veil draped over the forest. The fact that it needs different sound frequencies to be disturbed is a testimony of how powerful and intricate the veil is, of how the warlock who has created it is.

A new matter rises then: how to destroy it?

No simple arcane will be able to pierce through, that much is certain. Taehyung doubts Yoongi or Hyuna could be able to find a way in. He even wonders if the only way in is through one of Yumi's doors.

It's with a building trepidation that Taehyung gathers everyone once more.

"There's a veil," Taehyung announces after turning and landing in front of the group. "I— There's a veil. I saw it. There's—" He exhales and flattens a palm above where his breath pouch is in his

chest, his breaths erratically swirling there. “It’s with sounds. I could pinpoint it and— And there’s something. He’s here. Jungkook’s here.”

“It's true arcane can be disturbed with sounds,” Junhyun says, his eyes widening. “I remember the book you wrote.”

“There *is* a veil. It both casts an illusion and entirely conceals whatever it is that it’s hiding,” Taehyung says. “I found dozens upon dozens of disturbances, disturbances that only occur around arcane. The veil is huge. I wouldn’t be surprised if it spreads even to the ocean. It won’t break easily.”

“Neither my ring or Hyuna’s contraption have detected any arcane here,” Yoongi says and sifts through a book.

“So… How do you guys break it?” Namjoon tentatively says. “Because I’m just a human, so aside from yelling at the top of my lungs, there isn’t much I can do.”

Taehyung levels Namjoon with an unamused look that Hoseok and Jimin snort at. “That’s the main problem now. We don’t kn—”

Thunder snaps in the sky.

Taehyung’s head darts up. He stills as he stares at the storm his arcane has created, cold droplets trickling down his skin.

The conversation that erupts around him is drowned by the sound of the rain.

A perhaps manic idea forms in Taehyung’s head.

“Do you have a way to know if anyone is on this island aside from us? I’m not speaking about Jungkook. I mean passerby, hikers, hunters. Whichever,” Taehyung clarifies. “There shouldn’t be many, if any at all considering that this place is quite inhospitable, but I need to be certain.”

“That’s the first thing I checked when we arrived, and there wasn't anyone here apart from us and the sparse animals,” Yoongi says.

Good.

“Why are you asking?”

“I have an idea but it may kill any human or animal on ground.” Taehyung ignores the rush of surprise that runs through the group. “I found congesting disturbances where we currently are. I believe we’re standing at the center of the veil. Let’s say the veil is protecting a house, I think that the house is right here or close by.”

“Fuck. That’s— That’s really good news.”

“I need everyone to be in the sky again. Stack together,” Taehyung instructs. “If you have a way to shield yourself from sound, do it. No matter what, fly as high and far, preferably above the storm and clouds, not underneath it.”

“I have quite a sturdy body in my dragon self,” Junhyun says. “Everyone could perhaps find shelter in my muzzle.”

“In your mouth?” Namjoon squeaks. “Inside a *dragon’s* mouth?”

“It’d be safer than outside with me,” Taehyung remarks and Namjoon quietens.

“Do you need time, Son?”

“No. Let’s move now.”

Taehyung watches Junhyun shift and part his gargantuan muzzle where everyone climbs onto.

Junhyun flies, casting a vast shadow over Taehyung that shrinks the higher his father is. He reaches the heavy cloud that he vanishes into from Taehyung’s view. Taehyung waits a few more minutes just in case. Then he turns to his dragon self.

He hovers above the canopy, his wings keeping him afloat.

The palpitations of his heart slow down. The apprehension morphs into expectation.

The arcane in his breath pouch coils and churns. When Taehyung begins to collect more from his breath pouch, it does not lash out against him this time. It simply runs through the sky where it rages more intensely because it knows: how it will finally be let loose as it had craved to be.

Taehyung’s muzzle opens around a gust of warm wind and some flames flicker out of his mouth, licking against his teeth and fangs.

Heat meets cold.

Ire meets storm.

And perhaps, chaos will meet its peace at last.

The clouds gain in number. They grow heavier. Darker. Spreading wide over the island.

Taehyung can feel how far out his arcane stretches. How it slowly yet surely eclipses what must be the entirety of the land. His dragon rumbles in bliss, his chaos quivers in anticipation, Taehyung elated to allow them to fleetingly taste a freedom they haven’t known very often.

It is more of a deluge now that befalls on the island and strikes Taehyung in heavy drops.

The last piece of arcane is breathed into the sky.

Taehyung would feel serene if his peace had been with him.

The animals scurry through the forest. Hopefully most of them have found shelter in caves and underground. Perhaps Namjoon had been right. Perhaps the animals must have foreseen what would happen.

The sound of his batting wings is loud. Those of his beating hearts are too.

The clouds are beginning to circle above his head, their pace measured.

It has started.

However they need guidance.

Taehyung blows out another breath of tempered wind. This one works as a vessel rather than a catalyst. It is more of a ‘hand’ that hoards the storm from the sky. The ‘fingers’ pull and pull, dragging the clouds and their rain toward Taehyung.

The ‘hand’ persists in its gathering, so much so that it is impacted by what it harvests and slowly becomes a catalyst as well. It heightens the density and energy of the arcane in the clouds that whir faster and faster around Taehyung.

Soon, the storm becomes more of a cyclone.

It’s immense. It wraps around Taehyung’s gargantuan form and grows larger the higher it stretches into a cone.

The more Taehyung becomes the eye of the storm.

Taehyung’s jaws part open, this time around a different breath. The hurricane collects lightning from the sky. The atmosphere is unstable around him. It smells of petrichor and ozone. Of metal — *blood* — and something fresh that is echoed by the rain.

The natural lightning and Taehyung’s arcanic one coalesce together within the tornado. Taehyung is immune to his own lightning and quite resistant to nature’s one, however his skin and scales bristle as the thunderstorm crackles around him. It elicits a prickling pain that he shakes off.

The rotating whirlwind tears leaves from trees' crowns.

The wind upturns soils, rocks and even trees in his direct vicinity below him, all shattering into splinters and becoming one with the cyclone.

Keeping himself afloat becomes difficult, but he endures the aggravating storm.

Taehyung waits.

He waits until the hurricane threatens to throw him out of its core from its sheer, raw strength. He waits until the lightning gorges so much on Taehyung’s arcane that it’s painful and *it hurts* but he ignores it. He waits for the thunderstorm to be more powerful. More vicious and virulent. He waits and waits and waits and—

It’s ready.

The hurricane has reached completion, and Taehyung sets it free.

The hurricane blasts outward.

A sea of lightning snaps through the sky, forest and ground. *Endless.* Not a single sound can be heard at first, as though nature has stopped time to process the burst of pure energy and arcane.

Then, an earth-shattering roll of thunder booms in the air.

The sound wave is deafening. It ruptures Taehyung’s eardrums and quivers through each and every one of his cells. Blood trickles from his ears that he immediately starts to heal.

Taehyung’s gaze darts below him.

A translucent veil ripples with relentless waves at each new reverberation of thunder. Hundreds thousands of lightning bolts strike the island over and over and *over again,* each one trailed by blasts of thunder that all howl into a continuous one, ear-splitting outburst.

The veil is weakened, however it does not suffice to fully take it down yet.

Taehyung's body strains against the fluctuating atmospheric pressure, but also against blustery wind, rain and lightning raging across the island. His chest expands as his lungs fill with air. He reaches forward.

Taehyung’s talon halts when it touches something tangible.

The lizard shrieks.

Jungkook and Yumi’s heads dart toward the garden. Yumi springs up and races outside, her rock familiar rolling after her. Jungkook stands too and joins her.

The sunlight’s warmth is welcomed in the winter cold that hits Jungkook once he pauses in the garden. He peers at the forest ahead of him but sees nothing out of the ordinary. What is odd is that it smells like petrichor in spite of the bright, sunny weather.

Jungkook looks at the baby blue sky, devoid of any cloud, yet full of an odd phenomenon that heightens his confusion.

The sky undulates.

It’s as though thousands of pebbles are rippling through it like water. A distant, muffled boom echoes in the area, and Jungkook does not understand what happens at first.

However he knows who it is.

He watches with wondrous awe the sky that tears above him.

Something dark pierces through the blue expanse. It’s elongated and acute, curved as it carves itself a path. The slit is thin, however a second dark object joins the first one, then a third, a fourth, a fifth, and Jungkook comprehends that these are claws, ripping the sky open.

Jungkook’s hands fly to his ears when the booming sound of thunder fills the space. It mixes with the one of the deluge that abruptly pours in the garden from the tear.

Jungkook exhales a shaky breath when he sees the white talon that ruptures through an invisible veil. A tide of goosebumps pebbles his skin and it isn’t one of fear, but of unadulterated reverence, of euphoria and so much *relief.*

Taehyung is here.

Taehyung found Jungkook.

The talon dives deeper through the breach it made. It’s trailed by a snout, then a muzzle and jaws full of teeth that part open around a curling tongue. Bolts snap out of the mouth. A sphere of lightning expands on Taehyung’s tongue, fed by those that crackle out of the rip. The large ball shrinks into a minuscule bead of condensed arcane.

When the bead implodes, lightning blasts out and drowns the area in a blare of thunder.

A roar that tears out of Taehyung’s throat at the same time, paired with some kind of whistle. The strident sounds deafen Jungkook and everything is so *loud* that he wonders if his eardrums are about to burst.

Then, the veil entirely vanishes.

A cold rain suddenly falls on Jungkook and seeps through his clothes within seconds. The air feels electric around him, his hair rising on his nape and arms in endless goosebumps, and the ground rumbles beneath his feet as an earthquake that reverberates the dragon’s roar.

Jungkook closes his eyes. His palms press harder against his ears as his body tenses to protect himself from the thunderstorm. He does not need to, however, and his eyes fly open when the pain he expects to feel never happens.

His head darts to where Yumi is. She's propelled by the wind and sent to crash through the wall of her house.

Jungkook remains untouched.

The blustery wind arches past him. The lightning never as much as grazes his skin. As though Taehyung's arcane is unconsciously keeping Jungkook safe from itself. Jungkook's respiration is heavy as he peers at the ruins the forest has become. As he takes in the Hell Taehyung has rained.

For Jungkook.

What Jungkook experiences then can only be described as a tribute one would only kiss upon a God's skin: a feverish, devoted adoration.

Taehyung’s chaos is breathtaking, and Jungkook kisses it with his own.

Jungkook’s hands raise in front of him. Tattoos sprawl over his arms as everything darkens and loses its colors around him, yet his world brightens where Taehyung is. Flames dance on his fingers, spreading around him. They coalesce with Taehyung’s lightning and wind.

Their arcanes become one for a fleeting moment, where raven flames coil around lightning.

Where death meets carnage.

Jungkook’s eyes close as his head tilts back. He basks in the scent of smoky petrichor, bathed by the rain that has grown warm on his skin. He forgets about the pain in his ribs, about Yumi, about anything that is not Taehyung.

Silence befalls on the island.

Peaceful.

When his eyes flutter open, it's to the expanse of a gray sky that is sporadically lightened by a bolt. His gaze drifts on the gargantuan white dragon hovering above the garden.

Taehyung's head turns toward Jungkook.

Jungkook smiles.

"This is…"

"Fucking hell."

"He—" Dahee's throat clicks when she swallows. "By the Elders…"

From how high she and the others are in the sky in Junhyun's muzzle, Dahee can observe the waste that has been laid. She can't see the entirety of the land, but what she does have in her view has been *completely* razed, consumed by Taehyung's storm.

A flurry of dozens of fires are ablaze here and there from the remnants of lightning, all doused seconds later by the heavy rainfall. The trees are overturned and broken into a sea of splinters; pieces of trunks and torn leaves littering the uprooted ground.

What had once been is now gone.

Taehyung's arcane is potent in the air, still whirring through it, and even then, Dahee knows it is not at its full potential.

Taehyung is above the ruins of a house.

Someone is a few yards away below him.

Jungkook.

Dahee shivers when she sees the way the flames of Jungkook's arcane mingle with Taehyung's diminishing lightning, the swirling black and crackling white expanding across the ruins in a blanket of raw arcane.

The sight beneath her has become nothing but the vestiges of an island. The forest and cascade are no more, torn asunder by a devastation that stretches down the horizon.

Endless.

Dahee, like everyone else around her, remains mute in the face of Taehyung's chaos.

It's odd, to be confronted with a fear so visceral and primal of her own son.

Taehyung is no god.

He is only a dragonborn. He is like every other human being, simply gifted with a powerful arcane. Yet, what Dahee experiences right now is something akin to a fear of God, and she kneels beneath the deep sadness that swathes her.

Jungkook is here.

Jungkook is here.

He's here, peering at Taehyung with a smile floating on his lips.

Taehyung drops down and the relief is *dizzying* because Jungkook is here and alive. Jungkook is breathing and smiling, and Taehyung can nearly breathe again.

Before he gets to move a single talon forward, he catches Yumi stepping out of the rubble. The staccato rumbles in his chest and he's about to breathe out a bead of force at her when Jungkook speaks.

"Wait."

Taehyung does.

Jungkook's voice is a bit distorted, Taehyung's eardrums not fully healed yet. He doesn't shift to human. He also does not kill Yumi. Instead, he surveys the way she steps near Jungkook and halts next to him, the lizard on her head. Her face is set into an unreadable look.

Taehyung's talon twitches.

His claws dig into the soil. He wants — *needs* — to bleed her alive, but he waits. Because Jungkook asked, but also because Taehyung has to assess the situation before doing anything reckless that could endanger Jungkook.

The man with the scent is nowhere to be found, and neither is the mint scent.

"He's not here," Jungkook says. He seems hurt. Taehyung notices a few bruises on him. "It's only Yumi."

"In the flesh," Yumi grins. "Get any closer to me, and my lizard will sing a wonderful soothing lullaby to you."

"Can you turn to human, please?" Jungkook holds onto his left side. Jungkook is *hurt* and Taehyung— "Everything's fine. I promise."

Is it even Jungkook? What if—

"It's me," Jungkook says, who seems to be hearing each and every single one of Taehyung's thoughts. "The peace to your chaos, remember?"

A surge of relief hurls through Taehyung but it's ripped away by Yumi's presence, by how far away Jungkook still is.

Sounds of puddles being stepped on erupt on Taehyung's sides as he's joined by his family and everyone else.

It's when Jimin's hand touches his talon that he finally turns.

Taehyung's eyes are set on Jungkook. He smooths his expression to something impassive, refusing to betray a sliver of the tumult devastating him. He also hides his shaking hands in the pockets of his pants. Jungkook must know anyway. He always does.

"My, my, my..."

Taehyung's gaze drifts on Yumi.

Yumi clasps her hands behind her as she sways on the ball of her feet. Taehyung can smell blood from her but cannot see any trace of it on her. "Quite the squadron to save your prince, right? Quite the spectacle too," she hums and surveys her surroundings.

"Why," is all that Taehyung rasps.

"Well," Yumi draws out. "Long story short: I wanted to speak with Jungkook and may have been a tad too impulsive to reach that goal. We've struck a deal."

Taehyung glances at Jungkook. "A deal?"

"She's a necromancer," Jungkook announces.

Taehyung does not show his surprise.

"Straight to the point, I see," Yumi grumbles.

"She wants to come with us to Kaiya to inquire more about the Guardian," Jungkook carries on. "In exchange, she'll be willing to tell me more about necromancy and meet other necromancers. I—" Jungkook pauses because he must know he does not need to speak out loud.

Taehyung understands.

It's the first time Jungkook has the chance to meet another necromancer, and Taehyung can only imagine the relief Jungkook must be feeling if it is true.

"It's fucking bullshit," Yoongi snaps. "She took you away."

"I know. I was there," Jungkook says with a tilt of his head and a sass not befitting for the grievousness of the situation.

"You can't trust a single word that comes out of her mouth."

"She could be lying," Taehyung says to Jungkook and it still feels surreal. He can speak to Jungkook again. He can see him. He can pick up on his scent. He can touch him too, even if it has to wait.

“She’s not,” Jungkook assures, but Taehyung does not share the certainty. “And her familiars eat corpses, so there’s that too.”

“Why would I lie to you when I’d like to strike a deal?” Yumi interjects. “Plus I know about that wishing book you have. I’m the one who gave it to you.”

“What does this deal entail?” Dahee says on Taehyung’s right before Taehyung can inquire more.

“Like he said, I get to join your little trip to Kaiya to hopefully speak with the guardian,” Yumi explains. “Meanwhile Jungkook gains a new necromancer friend and my help, and everyone’s happy.”

“What about Dohyun?” Minsoo snips. “Isn’t he your friend?”

“Oh no.” Yumi shakes her head, her hair a short and blonde bob cut. “He’s a former employer. Nothing more.”

“You work for him.”

“Worked,” Yumi corrects.

“Why?”

“Because he’s too distraught by your absence,” Yumi answers Taehyung. “He isn’t useful to me anymore, but rather a crutch in my research.”

“What are your searches about?”

“Something personal. However, for the less personal aspect, I'd like to know more about the guardian, the primordial stone and its link with the plague. Oh and also that basilisk pet of yours,” Yumi giggles as she pats the crown of the lizard in her palm.

Taehyung derisively hums. “I don’t believe for one second that it is all you want.”

“It’s your decision, Taehyung.” Jungkook and Taehyung’s gazes meet and Taehyung hates how he has to wait and stand there when all he wants is to have Jungkook near him. “She’s the reason why Dohyun caught you. I know now that there are other necromancers in the world. We don’t need her. We can kill her, if that's what you wish.”

Taehyung wants to. He will, eventually. However he can’t think as well as he wants to right now. He can’t process much of the information because Jungkook is too far away and Taehyung needs him close.

“I—” Taehyung’s gaze darts between Jungkook and Yumi before settling on Jungkook again. “I don’t care. I don’t care about her or the deal or anything else. I want us to leave. Now,” he rasps and he hates how desperation bleeds into his voice.

“Ah but for you to leave, I need to be certain we all agree with the deal,” Yumi retorts, “or another door may show up that Jungkook or someone else will fall through.”

“As if.” A flock of raven bursts out of Yoongi’s palm and he seems to be about to kill Yumi himself when the lizard sings.

Taehyung watches how the ravens all halt at once. Their bodies shake, as though straining against the lullaby. Then they fall to the ground in splashes of ink. A sleepiness elevates within Taehyung and from a yawn that he hears from where Namjoon is, he isn't the only one feeling it.

"Another bird keeper," Yumi smiles, who has brushed aside Yoongi's attack like nothing.

Taehyung slings an arm over Yoongi's chest when the latter steps forward. "Do you want to go through that deal? Do you believe it's worth it?" He asks Jungkook.

"I'd like to. My mother is alive, isn't she?" Jungkook wonders and Taehyung makes a curt nod. "Yumi could help me find her. She could help as well with Lovely."

Revna?

"The primordial stone as well. Her door familiar is incredibly useful, so is her knowledge and arcane. If you allow it, we can work with her. If not, I understand," Jungkook continues. "I'm fine with both options. Knowing there are more necromancers out there is enough for me."

It's not enough, Taehyung thinks. Jungkook shouldn't have to put himself aside again, even less in regard to his necromancy for which no information can be found. Plus Taehyung cares more about killing the man with the scent rather than Yumi who had been nothing but a tool for the man.

"Alright," Taehyung says after a beat and ignores Yoongi's protests. He peers at Yumi. "We have a deal."

Yumi visibly perks up. "Really?"

"If you lied to us: you die," Taehyung rasps. "If Jungkook falls again: you die. If you try anything with him or as much as ruffle one of his strands: you die. Do you understand?"

Yumi seemingly does not, or perhaps she does not care. Her hand rises toward Jungkook's head. It does not get to touch Jungkook's hair as a bead of force bursts through her hand. It implodes two of the fingers that disintegrate into blood that splatters on the side of Jungkook's face.

"The next one is for your head."

"I understand now." Yumi lowers her arm as she steps away from Jungkook. "I was curious. My apologies." Then, she clasps her hands together once, blood trickling down her arm. "This is wonderful! And very exciting." She glances at Jungkook. "So many deaths have occurred at Kaiya, only God knows what kind of treasures necromancers like you and I may find."

Taehyung does not have to be a genius to know that Jungkook must share this interest. He still nurses his doubts, however he trusts Jungkook's judgment and his own.

Taehyung's gaze snaps on the door Yumi's familiar spits out in the mud. It darts back on Yumi when she plucks out a small pouch that she drops in front of Jungkook. "How do we contact you?"

"I'll know when to be there." Yumi's lizard is in her palm, licking at the blood pooling there. "As you've seen, my arcane is quite useful. As long as I am paid the price I want, I will work for anyone."

"That much is fucking clear," Jimin sneers. "I swear to the Elders if this is some kind of ploy Dohyun orchestrated—"

“He did not. He doesn’t even know I’m a necromancer,” Yumi shrugs and it checks out with what the man with the scent had told Taehyung about Yumi. “But I understand your distrust. I’m sorry for Jungkook’s bruises, it wasn’t meant to happen.”

Taehyung’s foot shuffles forward in the mud.

The lizard’s mouth opens.

“While I’m happy we’ve all come to an agreement, I need each one of you to step through the door, please.” Yumi gestures toward it with the hand missing two fingers. “I’m afraid your spectacle made me uneasy.”

“Jungkook first,” Yoongi spits.

“And losing my safety blanket?,” Yumi laughs. “Taehyung first, and Jungkook last.”

Taehyung’s heart beats in his throat. Perspiration creeps down his spine along with rain.

He doesn’t know what to do.

Should he step first and risk losing Jungkook again? Or should he step last and risk the exact same thing? He could try killing Yumi instead but she could be useful, and he doesn’t believe getting rid of her will be an easy feat to begin with. She’s surrounded by enemies, yet not a single trace of fear has permeated her scent.

“Do you trust me?”

Taehyung looks at Jungkook.

He nods.

“Then you can walk through that door, I’ll be right behind you.” Jungkook looks at Yoongi. “You too.”

The fear is back anew.

It’s the reason why Taehyung walks toward the door that is opened to Vanae’s forest. It’s also why he has to trust Jungkook because he can’t trust himself at the moment.

Taehyung passes by the doorway.

The rain follows him as clouds immediately begin to form above his head again, the sun disappearing. He halts several feet away from the door. He turns around and stares ahead.

Yoongi is next, his face etched into a glower. Then Minsoo, Namjoon, Insung and everyone else. Taehyung would feel bad for how drenched the group is if he cared, however all that matters is Jungkook.

“If we did all of this for nothing because she lied,” Yoongi starts, “I’ll kill her instead of trying to restrain her regardless of what you or Jungkook say.”

Taehyung resonates with the sentiment.

He watches the opened door standing in the middle of the forest.

Taehyung waits, feeling the soul of a drowning man.

Jungkook does not walk through it.

“Do you think they’ll actually follow through? They seemed very dubious.”

“Perhaps because you kidnapped me.” Jungkook fastens his pendants around his neck. He slides the wedding ring on his finger next, its weight reassuring. He drops the empty pouch in the mud.

“Aren’t you a mischievous prince.”

Jungkook turns toward Yumi with a smile. He walks toward her and he watches with a certain satisfaction the way her own grin dissipates. “You’ve seen what Taehyung has done, haven’t you?”

“Hard to miss.”

“Right?” Jungkook agrees and halts in front of her. "It must have been quite frightening for you. You were shaking, after all, a door at the ready to run away through."

Yumi bristles.

"You owe us. You owe *me* , because you and I both know you would have died if I hadn't spoken. *I* am the only reason why Taehyung hasn't immediately crushed you. Do you understand, Yumi?"

Yumi wears this emotionless veneer, however Jungkook catches the way her jaw clenches for a fleeting second.

"Taehyung and I would sacrifice it all if it means keeping each other safe, and it is not something you or anyone else can afford to neglect," Jungkook says with a dark chuckle, a yearning for violence suddenly bubbling beneath his skin after seeing how livid Taehyung had looked. “Taehyung had his wings torn from him because of you. One day, I will take yours apart, Yumi."

“Scary prince,” Yumi says with a strained voice. “A little more and I’d shiver.”

“Be careful, Yumi.”

“Understood.”

“Yes?”

Yumi’s gaze is stony as her mouth curls around a smile. “Crystal.”

Jungkook does not grace her with another word. He also does not show the apprehension that flares in him after his speech as he trudges toward the door. He’s not out of trouble yet, and threatening Yumi may have been a mistake.

However nothing happens.

The door remains where it stands as Jungkook steps through it.

He feels a gust of wind behind him and when he twists his head around, the door is gone.

Before Jungkook can look ahead again, a body collides onto him.

“Fuck,” Yoongi curses and does so a second time. “I was worried you wouldn’t walk through it, you crazy idiot.”

“I did say to trust me.” Jungkook hugs Yoongi with his free arm, his other one pressed against his aching side.

“Jungkook,” Namjoon sighs and sniffles. He pushes Yoongi aside to take his spot. “God. That was terrifying. Never again. We’ll have to find a solution for unwanted abductions. I’m done with this.”

Jungkook laughs. “I think we’re safe from it happening with Yumi.”

“I wouldn’t trust that,” Yoongi counters and wipes his eyes.

“She’s interested in Revna and I, but we’ll talk about this later.”

Jimin is the next one to hug Jungkook, then the rest of the group does so in turns, even Junhyun who pats Jungkook’s back.

“It is good to see you, Jungkook.”

“Everything has been quite bleak while you were gone,” Dahee quips and glances at the sky.

Jimin punches Jungkook’s arm as he dries his nose with Hoseok’s sleeve. “Never do that again.”

“I’ll try not to,” Jungkook chuckles. “I’m fine.”

“But we didn’t know that.”

Jungkook sobers up. “Thank you for looking for me,” he says with more emotion than intended.

“We would upturn the world to find,” Dahee says with a playful curve to her lips. “Someone has.”

All at once, Jungkook’s attention flickers on one dragonborn.

The downpour is slowly ebbing away, becoming more of a drizzle now.

Taehyung’s shoulders are slumped, his hair tousled and dripping with rain drops. He looks sick: skin ashen, eyes bloodshot, exhaustion draping his form and darkening the under-eyes.

Their gazes find each other, and the aloof mask Taehyung had worn shatters.

Taehyung’s head tilts to the side as his brows furrow, his face knitted into a frown. He staggers toward Jungkook who remains where he is, rooted in place by the tears that swim in Taehyung’s eyes, by how a few of them find an escape and mingle with the rain that falls down Taehyung’s cheeks.

Taehyung reduces the distance until not even a foot separates him from Jungkook.

Disbelief washes over Jungkook because Taehyung looks so utterly *broken.*

Taehyung's hands are slow when they raise. His hesitation is palpable, translating in the way he barely allows his fingertips to brush upon Jungkook's cheeks before twitching away. Something within Jungkook both breaks and mends when, after another moment of doubt, Taehyung tentatively cradles Jungkook's face.

Ever so careful.

Ever so tender.

Jungkook closes his eyes when Taehyung presses their foreheads together, their noses brushing.

The two of them exhale together, able to breathe again.

Jungkook realizes at once that this is where the constant strain in his chest had been from: the lack of air Taehyung would usually provide to Jungkook, and the stitches Taehyung has sewed on Jungkook's heart tighten.

Taehyung's palms slide around Jungkook to envelop him in a gentle embrace. Jungkook ignores the pain in his ribs to reciprocate the hug when he feels the tremors that run through Taehyung, or the way he heavily leans against Jungkook, as if he can't quite keep himself up on his own.

"You're here. You're… Y–You're here. You're alive."

Taehyung buries his face in Jungkook's neck but it does nothing to suppress the quiet sounds that tumble out of his mouth, something so pained.

Soul-wounded.

Taehyung leans back to cup Jungkook's face again, his gaze darting over it. "You're alive… You— You came back to me. I thought you wouldn't but—" Each of his words is intersected by a sob or an aborted one, all yanking at the thread within Jungkook. "You're here."

"I'm here," Jungkook says, holding onto Taehyung's wrist.

Taehyung's thumb brushes upon the apple of Jungkook's cheek, using his sleeve next to wipe the remnants of blood.

Jungkook doesn't know what to do or say, lost in the way Taehyung lays bare before him, not a single barrier existing between them.

Taehyung's trembling lips part around a sigh that is warm on Jungkook's forehead, right where Taehyung's mouth presses a kiss. "This— This is real, right?" There's a quiver in his timber, desperation laced through it. "Please."

"It's real. I am, I promise."

"I don't know anymore. I don't— Storm. Jungkook, storm, please."

"I'm here, Tae."

“You have to be. *Please.* ” Taehyung's eyes brim with tears and he tries to catch his breath but fails to, his respiration uneven.

“I need you to breathe,” Jungkook speaks softly, his throat constricted around the lump swelling there.

“I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t know what to do.” Taehyung presses a hand against his mouth and his chest heaves around a mute cry. “Thought I lost you and— And I was so, so *scared.* I was so scared. C–couldn’t breathe. You were gone. Everything was gone.”

Jungkook cups the back of Taehyung’s head to cradle him in his arms. “I’m okay. I’m with you, ‘kay?”

Taehyung nods, a hand gripping Jungkook’s shirt before he jerks away. His puffy eyes widen. “Are you okay? I saw bruises on you and— Do you— Are you hurt?” He pats Jungkook’s arms and chest and there’s an urgency in his motions that are still gentle. “You… You looked hurt. Smell like bloo—”

“I just have a cracked rib or two but I took a bit of a healing vial, so it’s not too bad.” Jungkook lets Taehyung lift his shirt. He does not flinch or wince when Taehyung’s fingers ghost on the purple bruise coloring Jungkook’s side.

“Okay. Okay, we—” Taehyung glances to the side before peering back at Jungkook’s chest. “I’ll take you to Minsoo, alright? He’s got vials. And everything. You’ll be fine,” he says and nods, as though trying to convince himself. “You have to be fine.”

“I am.” Jungkook holds onto Taehyung’s arm, his thumb kneading at the inner side of the wrist where he can feel the rapid pulse. “I’m fine, mh?”

Taehyung nods again with a stifled hum. His hazy gaze finds Jungkook’s. His palm caresses Jungkook’s face once more, the touch soft, as though afraid of hurting Jungkook any further. The pulp of the thumb wipes the corner of Jungkook’s eye, and Taehyung’s fingers then gently comb through Jungkook’s strands, tucking one of them behind the ear that he cradles.

Jungkook’s lips curve around a small smile. "Did you miss me while I was gone?"

"I didn’t have the time to miss you."

"Why?"

"Because I was scared.”

Taehyung’s face scrunches even if he visibly tries to fight it back, and Jungkook hugs him again as Taehyung breaks down anew. “I don’t know why I was so scared.”

“It’s okay,” Jungkook murmurs in the dip of Taehyung’s neck. “You don’t have to understand.”

“I thought I lost you. Thought you died. Couldn’t… Couldn’t stop thinking you died. I couldn’t breathe… It hurt so much.”

Jungkook muffles a *‘Sorry’* on Taehyung’s shoulder, his fingers clenching the back of Taehyung’s shirt.

“Were you scared?”

“A little,” Jungkook confesses with a sniffle. “I was… I was really lonely.”

“I’m sorry. I did everything I could to find you.”

“I know, Tae. It’s okay. We’re okay.”

Taehyung shakily exhales through his mouth. “I lost the ring. M’sorry.”

“What?”

Taehyung’s arms tighten their embrace around Jungkook. “The wedding ring. I was cleaning, and I forgot to put it on and then I lost it. I couldn’t find it anywhere and…It was gone. You were gone... I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.” Jungkook reclines to have a better view of Taehyung’s face that he holds between his palms. He glances at Taehyung’s left hand. “You found it again. And me.”

“I should’ve caught you. I’m sorry.”

“You caught me, Taehyung. Many times. You have again today.” Jungkook's heart wrenches at how distraught Taehyung is. Jungkook had anticipated the wrath of Taehyung’s chaos, however not its sorrow. “You ripped the sky to find me," Jungkook says with a pleased, hummed chuckle. "You did more than catch me."

Taehyung clasps his hand around Jungkook’s wrist to nuzzle the palm cupping his cheek.

Jungkook dries some of the tears still clinging onto Taehyung’s lashes, a small ribbon of sunlight lightening the misty, honeyed eyes. Jungkook peers up at the sky.

“It hasn’t stopped raining since you left,” Taehyung rasps.

“It has now.”

Taehyung looks up as well, the tremors in his hands slowly dissipating.

“It’s as though the sky had been crying with you.”

Taehyung’s wistful gaze lowers on Jungkook. “Something like that.”

Jungkook emits a soft sound, the itch pleasantly thrumming in his chest. “You’re sappy.”

It’s selfless when he closes the distance between his and Taehyung’s face, because he can tell Taehyung needs to have him close. However it’s selfish when Jungkook’s lips kiss Taehyung’s cheek, not quite at the corner of the mouth, but still close enough for Jungkook to feel Taehyung’s warm breath.

To Jungkook’s surprise, Taehyung reciprocates the tenderness.

Taehyung allows his mouth and the tip of his nose to graze Jungkook’s cheek in a feather-light touch. It’s accompanied by a hand that cups Jungkook’s nape and brings him flush against

Taehyung, not a hair's breadth existing between them. He leans back moment later, peering at Jungkook in a way Jungkook had never gotten the chance to be the recipient of.

"Welcome home."

Jungkook's lips press together. He surveys Taehyung, whose complete attention is granted to Jungkook; his husband who engulfs Jungkook in his affection, warm and secure; and Jungkook can't help but think that, yes.

He's home.

Jungkook murmurs those words against Taehyung's cheek.

"M'gonna need you to—" Taehyung brings him into another hug that Jungkook sinks into. "To stay close to me for a bit."

"You speak like I don't want the exact same thing."

Taehyung hums. He exhales heavily when Jungkook cards a hand through his hair and he parts from the hug another time to do a once over of Jungkook's form. "We need to get you fixed up, alright? And I need—" His head darts to the side when some rustle erupts in the forest. It's trailed by the chirp of a bird and the sound of flying wings a second later. The tension does not leave Taehyung's body, his shoulders drawn tight and alarm plastered over his face. "I'll fly you to Minsoo's lair, then—"

"Fuckers," a burly voice curses.

Another person makes a sound that is half a snort, half a sniffle. "You are embarrassingly sensitive, Father," Dahee quips and dabs a handkerchief on her eyes. "And you dare say Junhyun is a crybaby."

"'Cause he's the one sniveling," Minsoo counters.

Jungkook, who had entirely forgotten the presence of everyone else, only notices now how most of the witnesses are wiping their noses or eyes.

"Going to my lair," Minsoo says and flies off without another word.

"We'll be leaving too," Insung says, Mira and Yeji nodding with him. "We won't speak a word of what happened today," he adds with a glance at Dahee.

"Good. It must remain between us. You may consider this as a threat," Dahee says.

Insung chuckles. "Heard loud and clear."

"We weren't much of aid, but I'm glad we found you again." Mira grins at Jungkook. "It puts a lot in perspective," she says with a glance at Yeji.

"It has. We're glad to see you are safe and sound," Yeji continues, her arms looped around Mira's back. "We'll definitely have that hunt together!"

"I'd love that. Thank you," Jungkook smiles and watches the trio fly away.

Jungkook looks at Taehyung when he feels a hand on his cheek.

“We need to leave with him. And get you healed up. Now," Taehyung says. "I’ll fly us there.”

Taehyung turns to his dragon self without any other warning. He presents his talon to Jungkook who carefully climbs on it and sits there. A warm wind wraps around Jungkook as Taehyung’s other talon does, beginning to dry his clothes and wet hair.

Jungkook smiles to himself.

The flight is brief, only a few minutes long.

By the time they enter a tunnel carved inside a mountain, Jungkook is fully dried as he peers around at the gigantic cave-like lair. The space is huge, enough for Taehyung to land on the platform and lower the upper part of his body to rest Jungkook on the ground below.

“Sit,” Minsoo orders and gestures to a wooden bench.

Jungkook limps toward it and sighs once sat. He glances at Taehyung who has yet to turn to his human self. “Taehyung?”

Taehyung rumbles but it sounds distressed, punctuated by his head that darts between Jungkook and the tunnel they entered through.

“He’s safe with me,” Minsoo says. “You can go.”

To Jungkook’s shock, Taehyung does.

Taehyung swivels around and with the bat of his wings, he disappears through the tunnel.

“ *What?* ”

“He’s gone patrolling.”

Jungkook blinks a few times. “Uh?”

Minsoo lightens a stove. He throws some herbs and other ingredients in a pot that he exhales into. His breath has a faint, green sheen to it that dissipates when he coughs.

“What do you mean by patrolling? I didn’t think he’d be leaving my side for a while,” Jungkook adds and can’t quite quell down the disgruntled petulance in it.

Minsoo snorts. “He won’t. He just needs to patrol first, and then he’ll be stuck to you like some damn hatchling. His dragon is eating at him for failing to protect you,” he sobers. “He wants to make sure everything is safe for your return.”

A heat fills Jungkook’s face because Minsoo makes it sound so personal — *intimate* — and Jungkook hides a smile behind his hand. His eyes flicker on Minsoo’s sole one.

“Lovebirds,” Minsoo grumbles.

Jungkook clears his throat and pats his warm cheeks. “Sorry.”

Minutes elapse in silence before Minsoo grabs a stool that he drags in front of Jungkook and settles on. He drinks a dark liquid from a vial that he stashes in his pants' pocket.

"What's that?"

"None of your concern. Shirt off."

Jungkook huffs but complies. "I see where Taehyung got his gruffness from." He shows the old dragonborn the placement of any wound he may have that Minsoo probes at.

"Try not to get abducted again."

"No promises." Jungkook is a little nervous and intimidated to be in the presence of the aloof grandfather, and it isn't appeased by Taehyung's absence.

"Had to keep an eye on this stupid kid otherwise he would've done something dreadful enough to die in Bastille," Minsoo mutters and begins to apply the ointment from the pot on Jungkook's bruises.

"You make it sound like Taehyung was a second away from expunging the world."

"Because he was, and you know it," Minsoo retorts.

Jungkook ducks his head to conceal his smile, oddly happy at Minsoo's confirmation.

"Idiots, the both of you."

Jungkook purses his lips as he surveys the dragonborn carry on with his ministrations for a while.

The man hasn't been especially kind toward Jungkook, but he also hasn't been especially mean. For the most part, all he has shown to Jungkook is indifference.

Jungkook has to admit that he likes the old man, for some reasons. Partially because he sees some bits of Taehyung in Minsoo, but also because he has come to learn that Minsoo had healed Jungkook's wounds after the fight at the manor. Plus Minsoo does not mince his words or bother with any kind of pretense. He's honest, and Jungkook appreciates it.

Jungkook drinks the content of a bottle Minsoo hands to him and as he does, he can feel his bones *shift* in his side. The pain recedes, now a dull ache.

"You'll feel sleepy because of the potion. It accelerates the pace of your body's healing. Your ribs will be fine by tonight but they'll still be tender for a couple days."

"Thank you."

"You'll need a shower to remove the ointment in two to three hours. And also to get rid of that stench of yours."

"First of all: I don't smell *that* bad," Jungkook retorts, picking up on Minsoo's teasing. "And second of all: I didn't want to use Yumi's shower. But I'll take a bath."

"If Taehyung lets you," Minsoo says and stands to his feet to walk to his workstation.

“What do you mean?”

“Your natural scent is strong right now. Taehyung must like it. Dragonborns do in general when their ma—” Minsoo pauses. “When their family’s scent is pungent. We’re not big on perfume or things like that.”

“Oh. I see.”

Minsoo glowers when he peers at Jungkook. “If I see you blush one more damn time, I'm kicking you out of my lair.”

Jungkook stifles a chuckle. “Sorry, sorry.”

Minsoo whistles, the sound loud and strident.

It doesn't even take half a minute for Taehyung to appear on the cliff inside the lair, the ground shaking beneath Jungkook.

“He’ll be fine. There's everything he needs in this.” Minsoo tosses a paper bag that Jungkook deftly catches.

The claws of Taehyung’s front talons sink into the side of the cliff as he leans forward and lowers his head. His muzzle lightly bumps against Jungkook’s arm and he emits a sound that is half a rumble, half a whine. Jungkook caresses Taehyung’s snout. He’s about to utter some reassuring words when Taehyung’s worried gaze snaps on Minsoo and veils with a sharp callousness.

From what Jungkook has seen of Taehyung, the latter holds Minsoo close to heart and views him with an incredible amount of respect.

So as a deep growl elevates and resounds inside the lair, Jungkook grows a little nonplussed when he realizes that it’s aimed *at Minsoo*.

What sinks the last nail in the coffin of Jungkook’s confusion, is that instead of scolding Taehyung, Minsoo walks backward. He steps away from Jungkook, up until he leans against the kitchen counter and crosses his arms over his chest.

Jungkook can tell that he’s missing out on some important draconic social cues here that he’s not privy to. However, before he can ask for any clarification, Taehyung extends his talon and Jungkook dumbly climbs on it.

“Thank you,” Jungkook shouts to Minsoo who waves him off.

Taehyung makes another agitated vocalization that carries on for a while and only stops when Jungkook caresses one of the gnarled fingers.

One moment Jungkook is still flying the tunnel with Taehyung, and the next he’s standing in front of his and Taehyung’s house that is occupied by everyone else, including Revna that he can see curled up on Seokjin’s lap.

Jungkook's smile wavers when he thinks back on what Yumi had told him.

Taehyung must have noticed because he nudges Jungkook.

"There's something I have to tell you about Revna." Jungkook peers at Taehyung who nods and gestures toward himself. "You too?" Taehyung nods again. "Is it urgent?" Another nod but trailed by a shake of his head, and Jungkook translates this as uncertainty. "Is she in danger right now?" Taehyung makes a motion of denial. "Then it can wait a bit. I'm tired."

Taehyung emits the same rumbled whine he had made in the lair. He gently pushes on Jungkook's back to prompt him to walk forward.

"Will you join me soon?" Jungkook asks and Taehyung nods. "In a few minutes?" Taehyung looks at the sky and forest then back at Jungkook. "An hour? I'd like to be with you." Jungkook relaxes when Taehyung agrees with a motion of his head. "Alright. Don't take too long, please," he says and presses a kiss against Taehyung's snout.

When Jungkook steps inside the house, he's immediately greeted by Jimin who pulls him into a hug while Hoseok pats his back.

Jungkook pets Revna when he passes by her and the latter does not budge, fast asleep with a small snore. He doesn't hesitate when he plops down on Taehyung's armchair and draws his legs up.

He should shower, uncomfortable from the lack of doing so for the past days but also from the patches of the ointment Minsoo smeared on Jungkook's bruises.

He's lazy though.

Quite frankly, Jungkook doesn't want to do anything.

Everything that has gone down is slowly weighing down on him: the loneliness, the effort to remain awake, the constant pain and then the aftermath of whatever spell that has been used on him. He also had to be hyper aware of Yumi's behavior and moods, a reminder of his childhood at the citadel.

Jungkook doesn't want to think for a while. He doesn't want to have to lift a single finger, and most importantly, he wants to be with Taehyung. His head tilts to peer outside through the bay window where he can see a white dot hovering in the sky.

"Are you alright? How are your wounds?" Yoongi worries.

"They're mostly healed," Jungkook answers.

"What even happened with Yumi?" Namjoon says, sitting on the ground in front of the coffee table. "Yumi seemed so off and you looked somewhat comfortable next to her? That was—"

"Can it wait tomorrow?" Jungkook interjects, perhaps a tad too harshly.

"We just—" Yoongi's lips press into a thin line. "Can we know more? To anticipate any potential attack."

"She won't do anything."

“How can you be so sure?”

“I just am,” Jungkook snaps and he understands why Yoongi pushes and is so concerned, but Jungkook is *exhausted* and has barely arrived back to Vanae maybe half an hour ago. He wants to breathe.

However the others continue to fire inquiry after inquiry.

It’s at another question, this time from Dahee, that a gnarl resounds above the house, echoed by the sound of wings. Jungkook may be lost on some dragonborn social cues, however even he can pick up on the warning that seeps into the growl, one that everyone else must hear because they relent their questioning.

“We should let Jungkook rest,” Junhyun says. “He has barely arrived.”

“Right.” Yoongi clears his throat. “Sorry.”

Jungkook nods, relieved that Taehyung has intervened even if from afar. His thoughts trail back to minutes earlier, to when the storm had followed Taehyung outside of Yumi’s door. “Has Taehyung fought anyone while I was gone?”

“He roughed up Seungwon a bit from what Minsoo told me,” Jimin replies. “Nothing too bad.”

“How was he?” Jungkook peers at Jimin who sobers up.

A heavy silence settles in the living room.

Jimin is the one to disturb it, his shoulders tense. “Remember what I told you about heartbreaks in dragonborns?”

Jungkook nods with a frown.

“That happened.”

Jungkook's brows furrow. “Wasn’t—” Memories of Taehyung’s sobs resonate in his ears. “Wasn’t he just worried? Because when you told me about heartbreaks, you made it like something fatal and —”

“Taehyung’s worry was nothing compared to the wound your abduction carved in him," Dahee says. "His pain had reflected in the sky.”

“I—” Jungkook hugs his own chest, curling in on himself. “I think you're exaggerating how he may have felt.”

“A broken heart syndrome has a physical impact on dragonborns. It quite literally affects the heart, but also our breath pouch. Sometimes it is slow, other times it is abrupt and too fast for anyone to prevent it," Junhyun explains. "It works like a heart attack."

"Taehyung went through this when he lost his wedding ring," Dahee confesses.

Jungkook's head darts toward Dahee. “Taehyung almost *died?”* He croaks out, his fingers gripping onto his shirt to abate the irregular rhythm of his heart.

Dahee heaves a sigh. "In truth, I believe he started suffering from this syndrome the second you disappeared, and that losing his wedding ring had been a tipping point. A nearly fatal one, however Minsoo had been present, thankfully."

"What…?" Jungkook trails off. "That doesn't make sense."

"Why not?"

Because no one would love Jungkook like this, right?

"Jungkook, my dear…" Dahee turns on the couch she's settled in to face Jungkook. "Taehyung treasures you more than he, himself, realizes." She takes one of Jungkook's hands between her own, and the curve of her lips is dampened by the sadness in her eyes. "Taehyung was mourning a loss that had yet to happen. He was grieving you, Jungkook."

Jungkook silently watches Dahee, unsure on what to say or feel. "That's…"

It's surreal to Jungkook.

His mind struggles to wrap around the fact that someone can care this much about him, that unlike what he had always believed, his disappearance would not go unnoticed. *He was missed.* Someone looked for him, cried for him, then nearly died for him.

"Oh…" Jungkook breathes out, because it is all he can say.

He's torn between between worry and relief, happiness and longing, and there is also this overwhelming sense of wonder that flickers alive even if it should not because Taehyung could have *died* but—

But Taehyung cared.

So much.

Jungkook looks up at Dahee when she squeezes his hand and pats the back of it before reclining in her seat. "And is he alright now? Will he have any repercussions from this? Or lasting symptoms?" Jungkook fires and straightens up. "Will he—"

"He's fine, I promise," Dahee reassures. "My father was here to prevent anything from being too grievous. Taehyung will simply need rest, as you do."

"Alright." Jungkook heaves a sigh, tension leaving his muscles. "Okay. That's good. He—"

"He was terrifying," Namjoon blurts out and when Dahee barks out a laugh, Jungkook smiles too. "I mean… *Hello?* I was always worried about accidentally looking at him the wrong way and losing my head the next moment. One time I thought I'd be struck by his lightning."

Jungkook wonders if the people of Vanae witnessed Taehyung's storm too.

They must have.

Were they scared? Worried? Or experiencing an eerie admiration for the sheer power of Taehyung's arcane, akin to Jungkook now?

“I worry about his arcane,” Dahee frowns. “It continuously bled out of him for nearly eight days at an immense magnitude. Not only that, he also then made a hurricane to break through the veil. This alone required a *monumental* amount of arcane.”

“Do you think his breath pouch is depleted like before?”

“I’m not certain.”

“He’ll need rest no matter what, and to allow his arcane to regenerate,” Junhyun nods.

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Jungkook's thoughts flicker back on Taehyung. Not that they've ever left him. “I—” He fiddles with his wedding ring, rubbing his thumb on the stormy diamond. “I never imagined for one second that my disappearance could have… hurt Taehyung. I knew he’d be angry, but…”

“Taehyung cherishes you,” Dahee says with a kind smile. “Which is why he is away right now. He’s making sure the area is safe for you.”

“Minsoo told me.” The itch softly swirls in Jungkook’s chest, thrumming with relief and nurtured by this sense of protection Taehyung has been providing Jungkook with. “What can I do to help him? I’m no dragonborn, so I’m not certain on how to navigate the— The aftermath of the heartbreak?” He tentatively asks, the word foreign on his tongue.

“Be yourself,” Junhyun smiles.

“And if you please,” Dahee continues, “allow him to take care of you.”

“That’s all?”

“That is all Taehyung will need: being with you while nursing you to health himself.”

That is something Jungkook can do. And wants, too.

“Taehyung growled at Minsoo," Jungkook announces to the room.

A chorus of *‘What?’* trails after the declaration.

“He left for some time to patrol, and when he came back inside Minsoo’s lair, he growled at him. As in, threateningly so. Why?”

“I’ll be damned,” Junhyun guffaws.

“Oh Minsoo’s gonna be pissed later on,” Jimin snickers and elbows Hoseok who also joins in the hilarity.

Jungkook frowns. “Can someone explain?”

“Taehyung’s instincts must still be haywire, and dragonborns can be unreasonably protective of a specific closed one.”

“A specific closed one?” Jungkook echoes.

“A mate.” Mirth dances in Dahee’s gaze when Jungkook’s mouth opens around a strangled squeak. “When a dragonborn’s mate is hurt, they will feel the need to keep everyone away from them for a moment—"

"Okay, I see, got it. That's en—"

"—so that they can ensure their safety, well-being and happiness in peace," Dahee continues in spite of Jungkook's feeble protests. "To devote their entire attention and care to them.”

“Lady Dahee” A heat crawls up Jungkook’s cheeks. “We’re not mates,” he weakly objects.

“A fact that Taehyung appears to have forgotten,” Dahee snickers.

The rest of the group laughs when Jungkook burrows his flaming face in his palms.

“I’m sleeping,” Jungkook huffs and his heavy lids fall shut as he tries his best to not ponder on all that has been said.

Taehyung watches from a distance how Jungkook falls asleep within minutes. Hoseok covers him with a blanket and it bothers Taehyung, but he needs to finish scouting the area surrounding his and Jungkook’s house before he deems it safe enough to go back.

Taehyung scans the forest for longer than he had promised to Jungkook, enough for the sparse clouds to dissipate and for the moon and stars to lighten the sky. It’s only when he hears his name be mumbled from afar that Taehyung eventually lands in front of the house and turns to human.

Taehyung’s mouth opens to speak but Jungkook precedes him.

“You said an hour. Not five.”

The accusation isn’t deaf to Taehyung's ears. He reduces the distance that is too great between them. “You were sleeping.”

Jungkook is still too far away.

Taehyung's arm curls around Jungkook who takes this as an invitation to press his chest flush against Taehyung.

Taehyung exhales, his tense muscles loosening up.

He's still dazed, both from the relief and the way the pain in his chest has vanished the second he had pulled Jungkook in his arms.

Taehyung’s senses narrow on all that Jungkook encompasses. It makes everything more real like this, and less like a particularly cruel dream his mind has conjured. The grim floral scent suffuses Taehyung’s nose, so potent and missed that Taehyung can't help but briefly bury his face in Jungkook’s neck. Jungkook’s soft hum and voice fill Taehyung’s ears, quieting the silence that had been so *loud.*

Then, there's Jungkook's skin that Taehyung feels when he sprawls a hand beneath Jungkook's shirt, the other on the neck. It's a little tacky, yet so velvety and warm, responding to Taehyung's touches.

Jungkook's here.

"Can you stay with me?" Jungkook asks, who also doesn't seem eager to break the hug.

"I'm not going anywhere." Taehyung doesn't think he could if Jungkook asked him to. He still parts away from him to slowly turn him around. "Let's get inside," he says and places a hand on Jungkook's nape to guide him forward.

When they enter the house, Taehyung notices that no one has left it yet.

The group is discussing together, the subject of the conversation kept light, most likely due to Taehyung's earlier intervention when he had picked up on Jungkook's distress.

Jungkook plops on Taehyung's armchair.

Taehyung crouches next to him. "How are your ribs?"

"They're fine," Jungkook answers through a yawn. "They hurt a little bit, but it's more of an ache."

"The pain should fully recede in a few hours." Taehyung takes the blanket Jungkook reaches for. "I'll bring you another," he says then walks upstairs to toss the used blanket in the hamper. It smells too much like other people. So he grabs a clean comforter that he drapes over Jungkook's sleepy form less than a minute later.

Taehyung stares at Jungkook for a few seconds. There's a strand tickling Jungkook's cheek that Jungkook pushes away but it falls back over his face seconds later.

Taehyung's fingers twitch.

Laughter erupts on his right.

His hand tightens into a fist.

"Are you thirsty?" Taehyung wonders, and when Jungkook nods, he says "I'll get you some water."

"Thank you, Tae."

Taehyung swivels on his feet, and unlike what he had told Jungkook, he steps away from him to enter the kitchen. Restlessness swarms Taehyung, rendered acute by the confusion that clogs his throat.

Jungkook came back to Taehyung.

Taehyung *is* relieved, breathlessly so.

Yet he can't bring himself to be happy about it, and he doesn't understand why. His peace is back, but it's as though he's unable to properly enjoy his presence.

Taehyung grows on edge, his nerves raw with a vulnerability he can't decipher the origin of. But Jungkook is here and safe, Taehyung comforts himself with. This is all that matters: Jungkook tucked in Taehyung's armchair, surrounded by his own family and Taehyung's, the most secure place he could ever be in.

Everything's alright, yet it feels like nothing is.

Taehyung still gives Jungkook the tea he has prepared and added some honey to. He also makes some quick snacks, nothing too heavy as Taehyung intends to cook dinner for them later on. Jungkook takes the pair of toasts, and Taehyung isn't blind to the veil of *something* that obscures Jungkook's gaze, as though Jungkook is also bothered by a matter.

When Jungkook and Taehyung's gazes meet, Jungkook's smile falters, and Taehyung's lips press into a thin line.

Taehyung worries when Jungkook leaves the snacks untouched on the end table next to his seat.

He hates the distance it puts between himself and Jungkook, but he gives himself a distraction by taking a brief shower and changing clothes before coming back downstairs.

Taehyung wants to ask Jungkook what is wrong. He also craves to have Jungkook close to him like he never has before with anyone else, but he can't bring himself to speak out a single word, let alone these. He can't bring himself to touch Jungkook either like he wants to. He can't reach out a hand, card it through the strands. He can't cradle Jungkook's face, tuck it near his until their breaths become one, until Taehyung can breathe again but he *can't,* incapable of extricating himself from the pit of heartache he's falling into.

He wants to cry again.

But it's stupid because *Jungkook is here.*

Jungkook discusses with everyone else while Taehyung busies himself by checking the food they have. Jungkook seems out of it, his attention away from Taehyung, and so Taehyung takes this moment to sneak outside.

Taehyung reclines against the bay window lining the kitchen. He crouches, his head hung low between his knees. He presses the heel of his palm against his stinging eyes. His fists tighten and relax, over and over again in the hope of taming down the ire that coalesces with his upset.

The door slides open then shut.

Taehyung's respiration is made a little easier when he catches the whiff of grim flora.

"It's cold." Jungkook shivers.

Taehyung doesn't summon the fire aspect of his arcane because he needs to let it rest for a while. It hurts, not being able to warm Jungkook.

"Everything okay? You seem off."

Taehyung rises to his feet. "I should be asking you this." He peers at Jungkook — *because he can look at him again* — and says "What's wrong?"

“I’m alright.”

“Jungkook.”

Jungkook steps near Taehyung and the smile that tints his lips is more candid than the previous ones he has drawn in the living room. His arm curls around Taehyung and Taehyung had not realized how much he had missed its weight. “I like when you say my name.”

“Answer my question and I’ll consider using it more often,” Taehyung quips, relishing on how easily they fall back into their bickering.

“Prick." Jungkook rests his head on Taehyung’s shoulder, his fingers kneading haphazard patterns on Taehyung’s skin. “I just…” He sighs and he nuzzles his face on Taehyung’s shirt. “It’ll sound odd. And mean.”

“And you think this will bother *me* because…?”

Jungkook chuckles. “Touché.”

“What is it?”

Jungkook fidgets with the short sleeve of Taehyung’s shirt. He remains quiet for a while.

Taehyung is about to press a little more when Jungkook finally speaks.

“I want them gone.”

Taehyung peers down at Jungkook, able to see the lashes that flutter and the lips that move around more words that take Taehyung aback.

“Everyone in our house. Your family, Namjoon and Yoongi too. Everyone."

Taehyung emits a stupid *‘Oh’*.

All of a sudden, everything clicks into place.

This is why Taehyung had not been able to relax. Why he couldn’t be comfortable or be around Jungkook how he has been wanting to. Why he hasn’t been able to take care of him how he yearns to.

The problem and its solution is so simple, yet it hadn't crossed Taehyung’s mind once.

“I’m happy to see them, but it’s so noisy and I’m overwhelmed by all the sounds and everything. I want quiet and to be with you. I’m feeling clingy,” Jungkook mumbles, unknowingly echoing Taehyung’s own feelings. “I want to take a bath too. I’m sleepy, and my body’s heavy... I’m hungry.”

Jungkook seems to be saying whatever that passes in his head, yet Taehyung catalogs each and every piece of it.

If there is a word to describe how Taehyung feels at the moment, it’d be ‘pleased’. Pleased because Jungkook has chosen Taehyung to share his troubles with, and all that Taehyung wishes to do now is handling each of them and more one at a time.

“What do you want to start with?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook whispers and his brows furrow. “I— I don’t know. Is that okay?”

“It is.”

“M’kay.” Jungkook falls mute for a moment then he says “I want to wash my hair. Can I wash them?”

Taehyung has a *‘You don’t have to ask’* teetering at the tip of his tongue that he reneges on. “Of course. You can,” he settles on replying because he has an inkling this is what Jungkook needs to hear, and if the way Jungkook sinks against Taehyung is any hint, it is the right answer.

“Can we do it now?”

“Alright.” Taehyung glances inside the house. “Alright. Come on.” He leads Jungkook inside with a hand on his lower back.

Taehyung tries to quell down his happiness at being able to hold Jungkook like this again but he miserably fails. He just hopes that it doesn’t translate too much into his scent.

They both ignore the group in the living room to make their way upstairs.

Taehyung opens the bathroom’s door for Jungkook, letting him enter first then trailing after him. He lightens the lanterns inside then pauses. Taehyung peers at the back of Jungkook’s head and a longing flares in him that only lessens when he cups the nape.

Jungkook is with Taehyung, he’s fine and truly here.

Everything’s fine, Taehyung tells himself in a mantra.

“Sit here,” Taehyung instructs and does not miss the small sigh of relief Jungkook emits. Jungkook looks relaxed now, what upset that had been weighing him is gone from his form. “We’ll start with your bath and hair. It’ll be good for how groggy your body may feel after taking Minsoo’s meds.”

“‘kay.”

“That works with you?”

Jungkook yawns and lazily blinks. “You decide.”

Jungkook seems content to not have to think or do anything, and Taehyung can’t help but muse about how in sync it is with how Taehyung wants to take care of Jungkook and handle everything he may need.

“Bath first, shampoo second, then food," Taehyung says. "If you want anything in-between, you tell me, yes?”

“Mhm.”

Taehyung does not waste another second to start preparing Jungkook’s bath.

The water is first, filling the tub, and he adds some of the products he has seen Jungkook put in his bath. He also pours half the content of a vial for soothing muscles that Taehyung sometimes uses when his scars ache too much.

“Are you okay?”

“I am, why?” Taehyung asks.

“They said my abduction was a lot on you, and your mother told me you could have died. ”

Taehyung’s head swivels around. “ *Huh?”*

“From heartbreak.”

Taehyung stills on his spot. He thinks back on the constant pain in his chest and of the few instances where he had felt Minsoo’s arcane flow through him. “I wasn’t dying because you were gone. Let’s not get dramatic,” he retorts but he doesn’t sound too convinced.

“Taehyung.”

“I was… I was a mess, but I wasn’t dying from heartbreak.” At least Taehyung does not believe he had been, even if he had felt as such.

“You better not, or I’ll raise you then kill you myself.”

Taehyung would laugh at the retort if he wasn’t busy thinking about how much he has missed this.

“You didn’t reply,” Jungkook notes. “You can tell me if I’m being too needy. Or if you’d rather it be me taking care of you since everything was hard on you. I was fine with Yumi, for the most part.”

Taehyung watches the bubbles that form in the tub. “You don’t have to take care of me.”

“I know that. But it’s okay if it’s what you need right now. I really like taking care of you. And my own… My own needs or wants can wait sometimes.”

“They shouldn’t.” Taehyung shuffles to crouch in front of Jungkook who’s installed on a short stool. “If there’s something you want, ask for it.”

Jungkook’s fingers are tangled together, the thumbs brushing over one another. His gaze is evading, never meeting Taehyung’s. “Is it really okay if I do?”

“Yes.”

“I want to take care of you, but I want you to take care of me more than I want to take care of you. Does—” Jungkook frowns and intelligibly mumbles to himself. “Did that make sense? It made sense in my head.”

Taehyung lifts a hand to his mouth to conceal his smile. “I understood what you meant.”

Jungkook glances at him before looking away. “Isn’t it selfish?”

“You can take what you want. I won’t be the one to stop you from doing so. I’m not Seohyung, if that wasn’t obvious already,” Taehyung jests and Jungkook’s nose scrunches around a smile. “You can be greedy, or however else you want to be.”

“I suppose.” Jungkook slumps against the wall. “But it was hard on you.”

“I’m good now. You’re here,” Taehyung adds, a little coy, yet candid.

Jungkook doesn’t avert his gaze when it finds Taehyung’s. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Then…”

“Yes?”

“Can you take care of me tonight? Please? I just— I just want to breathe with you.”

What semblance of restlessness within Taehyung vanishes, like he has finally been given what he had needed. “I can.”

“Do you feel the need to?”

“I do.”

“Out of guilt?”

“No.”

“Out of what, then?”

“Out of…” It’s hard to find the proper, but Taehyung settles on one that comes the closest to the a truth he can’t fully unravel. “Fondness.”

Jungkook perks up. “Fondness?”

“Mhm.” Taehyung's gaze is riveted on Jungkook and so he both catches Jungkook’s smile but also the way it drops when some sound erupts downstairs. Taehyung straightens up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll tell everyone else to leave.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s what you want.”

‘Soft’ doesn’t come close to describing the way Jungkook peers up at Taehyung. There’s something else in it a little more intimate and emotional, and Taehyung can’t resist the urge to lightly card his hand through Jungkook’s locks.

“Thank you,” Jungkook whispers, gripping onto the side of Taehyung’s shirt.

After one last brush of his thumb on Jungkook's temple, Taehyung exits the bathroom, however not without another look back at Jungkook.

"Is he alright?" Yoongi asks.

"He's fine. He needs to rest." Taehyung halts at the bottom of the stairs. He crosses his arms over his chest as he leans against the wall. "Would be better if we called it a night."

"Who should stay here?"

"I could? Along with Yoongi?"

"That—"

"No." Everyone peers at Taehyung. "We'll be fine."

"Some of us should stay in case Yumi tries anything again," Hoseok interjects.

"We were all present when Yumi took Jungkook. She succeeded nonetheless. Just…" Taehyung's teeth grit. "Leave us for tonight. We'll see each other later."

"We know you both want to spend time together but I'm worried," Jimin says. "And—"

"And they will be alright," Dahee says and stands. "Let us leave."

"Jungkook was kidnapped and only came back hours ago!"

"I'll be with him the whole time," Taehyung snips.

"You were *both* abducted once," Namjoon carries on, who has never dared headbutting against Taehyung.

"And maybe it'll happen again in an hour or tomorrow or Elders know when. Or maybe we'll die in two days. Right now Jun—" Taehyung clamps his mouth shut. He doesn't want to pin everyone's departure on Jungkook alone, especially not when he, himself, wants the group to leave as well. "I want to be with him. Right now. So leave. We'll be fine."

"Oh. Oh!" Jimin springs up and snickers to himself. "I seeee," he draws out. Taehyung's eyes narrow but he reciprocates Jimin's hug when he approaches him. "Take care of him."

"Yeah."

Dahee pecks Taehyung's temple, the others also exchanging hugs and accolades with him.

Soon, everyone leaves the house.

Except for one person that stands at the entrance door.

"Are you being honest with him?"

A glower immediately knits Taehyung's face as he stares at Yoongi. "Uh?"

"Are you?"

“Yes?”

“Don’t lead him on.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Be honest and don’t play any games with him. Jungkook deserves to be happy and—”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I think you don’t realize what kind of affection Jungkook wants from you,” Yoongi counters.

Taehyung has half a mind to throw the know-it-all warlock out the house.

“And I think that it’ll end up hurting him even if he won’t say a word or show anything about it. Jungkook has always been put after everyone else by those surrounding him.”

“You speak like *I* would ever do this. I won’t.”

“You say that now but—”

“Want to know something? *Jungkook* is the one who asked me to make you leave. He said that he wants you gone and guess what I did?” Taehyung pushes himself off the wall to walk toward Yoongi and stop in front of him. “I made you leave. Because he asked. Because that’s what he wanted. So I don’t know what kind of game you believe I’m playing with him, but all you’ve got to know is that I’ll give him whatever he wants.”

“What about what *you* want?”

The answer comes easily to Taehyung.

“I want to take care of him.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Don’t do it if you’ll regret it later or push him away,” Yoongi warns, and it only serves to worsen Taehyung’s temper. “He deserves better than that.”

“I’ll do as I damn well please.”

“I’m serious, Taehyung.”

“So was I when I challenged the Council or went on a manhunt for him,” Taehyung bites back. “It’s as though you’ve forgotten how much I—” His fingers tighten around his arms. “How in pain I was when he was gone. You were there. You saw me.”

Yoongi deflates. “I don’t want you to hurt him.”

“I won’t.”

“Purposefully or accidentally.”

“If I ever do, I’ll make it up to him, but Jungkook and I’s relationship is none of your concern. He can very well make his own decisions and think for himself, and if he doesn’t want to do either of that, then I’ll be there to do it for him if that’s what he wishes.”

Yoongi’s mouth opens but closes as he glances upward behind Taehyung.

Taehyung turns around.

Jungkook is standing at the top of the stairs, his stony gaze set on Yoongi. “Are you done?”

“Yup,” Yoongi says and pops out the *‘P’*. “Just had to say my piece.”

“Now that you have, you can leave instead of harassing my husband for no reason,” Jungkook says with a quirk of his brow.

“Yeah, yeah,” Yoongi waves off and walks out. “Enjoy your night.”

“I love you!”

“Love you too.” Yoongi closes the door and Taehyung only notices then that Jimin is still outside and seemingly waiting for Yoongi, the two of them making their way through the forest.

“What the fuck is wrong with him.” Taehyung strides up the stairs.

“He’s protective.”

Taehyung’s scoff is received with a slap on the arm.

“Are they all gone?”

“Yes,” Taehyung says as he and Jungkook enter the bathroom together.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung. “The water’s cold.”

Taehyung wordlessly kneels in front of the tub to dip his hands in it and warm the water. Jungkook adds some more product in the bath that Taehyung wouldn’t be able to begin deciphering the properties of, but Jungkook is humming to himself, his scent growing a little sugary, and Taehyung wordlessly helps spread the products through the water. If Taehyung also uses some bits of his wind to create ripples and more bubbles that Jungkook seems to like, Jungkook is none the wiser.

Once done, Jungkook begins to undress himself.

Taehyung should probably leave, shouldn't he?

However Jungkook does not ask him to, and Taehyung doesn’t want to be away from him. He still gives Jungkook some privacy by rummaging through the sink’s cupboard to retrieve necessities like towels and a clean washcloth.

It’s only when he hears sounds of water and a heavy sigh that Taehyung closes the cupboard and leaves his burden on the counter.

“This feels nice.” Jungkook shuffles in the bubble bath where he dips his head to wet his hair and slick them back. “Can you come closer?” He asks and rests his cheek on the side of the tub.

Taehyung does, albeit with a certain hesitation. He lowers to be at Jungkook's eye level.

Jungkook grabs Taehyung's left hand, drops of water trickling on the tiles. He caresses the wedding ring, his thumb passing by the ruby. "I wasn't really scared, so I got the time to miss you." He peers at Taehyung, his cheek a little squished and face colored with a rosy tint from the mist that fogs out of the tub.

"You're back now."

Jungkook hums, his eyes droopy. "Can I ask something weird?"

"Always."

"Have you ever washed someone?"

Taehyung makes a noncommittal sound of surprise. "No. I can't say I've ever washed anyone."

Jungkook clicks his tongue at Taehyung. "No need for sarcasm."

"Why are you asking?"

"'Cause I'm sleepy and lazy. And—" Jungkook pauses to yawn, his thumb stilling on Taehyung's ring finger. "I was thinking it'd be nice if someone could wash me. Like… Like washing my back and hair. I wonder how it feels."

"I'm assuming this someone would be me?"

Jungkook's gaze sharpens even if still veiled with tiredness. "You'd be fine with me asking someone else?"

No.

"It's your decision to make."

"But I don't want to make any decisions right now."

"It's still about what you want or—"

"You. I want you," Jungkook says, who seems too sleepy to realize half of the things that come out of his mouth. "I want you to take care of me. I don't want anyone else."

Taehyung's eyes narrow in confusion. "Then why did you ask if I'd be fine if you asked another person?"

"Because I wanted to hear you say no," Jungkook mumbles and lowers his gaze.

Taehyung bites back a smile.

Sometimes he forgets how much Jungkook appreciates when honesty is vocalized, even for matters where the answer may be obvious.

"I thought 'no', if that makes it any better."

Jungkook glances up. "You did?"

“I did.”

Jungkook burrows his grin in the crook of his elbow as he lets go of Taehyung’s hand. “That’s good.” He reclines to fold his legs up, his arms wrapping around his knees where he hides half of his face, and Taehyung doesn’t think he has ever seen Jungkook be so shy before. “Will you, then? I don’t want to do anything.”

“I’ll handle them for you,” Taehyung assures, and Jungkook sags. “Would you like that?”

The scent of caramel flows toward Taehyung, growing sweeter by the minute.

“Please.”

Taehyung caves into the impulse again.

He allows his fingers to comb through Jungkook’s strands and Jungkook slumps forward with a soft sigh.

It’s just them now.

Taehyung does not have to worry about what he says or does anymore. He can simply feel, and enjoy as he yearns to.

Taehyung pulls away to his sweatpants above his knees and says “Is it fine if I step in the tub?”

“Yes.”

After locking the bathroom’s door shut, Taehyung halts in front of Jungkook. “Can you move to the left?” Jungkook complies, making space for Taehyung. Taehyung steps a leg in the tub’s warm water, then the second and he settles at one end of the tub where he sits down. “I’m not washing your dick and ass.”

Jungkook swivels around with a splash of water. “You’re so crude!” He smacks Taehyung’s knee for good measure. “You just ruined the moment we were having.” He makes a motion to smack Taehyung again, however Taehyung seizes his wrist before he can. “I hate you,” Jungkook grumbles and refuses to move, prompting Taehyung to pull him closer.

“Come on,” Taehyung chuckles, only satisfied when Jungkook is a couple feet away. “Where do you want to start?”

Jungkook stares for a moment. Then he leans backward on his hands, facing Taehyung. His leg elegantly lifts out of the bubble bath to prop on Taehyung’s knee. “My feet,” he declares with a jut of his chin. “Promptly.”

Taehyung drags a finger along the sole of Jungkook’s foot, adding some tamed lightning to it.

Jungkook startles with a squeak and jerks away from Taehyung. “Stop it,” he says through a laugh. “That tickles.”

Taehyung fishes Jungkook’s leg from the water. His hand curls around the ankle that he raises and tugs on, drawing Jungkook near him again. He takes the washcloth that he dips in the soaped water as he catalogs the little green patches of ointment peppering Jungkook’s leg here and there.

There is no hesitation when Taehyung launches himself into his task.

He's meticulous, starting first with Jungkook's feet and toes that playfully wiggle and are trailed with a snort when Taehyung pinches one of them. The ankles are next, rinsed off the healing pomade.

The washing still remains playful and light.

It's just feet, after all.

However when Taehyung trails the cloth higher up one of Jungkook's calves, Taehyung is suddenly hit by how private this whole act is.

Taehyung is hunched forward, sitting on the edge of the tub. He's facing Jungkook in the tub, closer than he had been before now that Taehyung is focusing on the calves. Jungkook is obviously entirely naked even if Taehyung can't see anything because of the bubbles. But Jungkook is still naked. Because he's taking a bath.

Because Taehyung is *bathing* Jungkook.

It should feel a little awkward. Or at least, Taehyung believes that he would if it were anyone else. Yet here with Jungkook, it feels good.

Right.

It feels right to slide the damp washcloth along the shin that he holds up. It still does when he shifts his focus on the other calf, the foam of the bubbles sticking on Jungkook's skin for a fleeting moment before it begins to drift down on its own, or pushed away by Taehyung's motions.

It's as though Taehyung was meant to tend to Jungkook like this.

"Shouldn't it be embarrassing?" Jungkook wonders, whose thoughts appear to have followed the same path Taehyung's walked.

"Me washing you?"

Jungkook nods.

Taehyung scrubs away another smear of the healing ointment on Jungkook's shin. "Do you find it awkward?"

Jungkook shakes his head. "No. I really like it." He leans to his right against the tub and folds both arms on the edge, resting his head on them. "It's a little intimate, right?"

"I think it's more than a little," Taehyung says. Whispers, really, because anything above that feels too loud.

Jungkook's lips curl upward.

Taehyung can feel Jungkook's gaze on him as he dips the cloth in the water again while bending Jungkook's leg. Taehyung cups the underside of Jungkook's thigh with a hand, the skin soft and smooth beneath his fingers.

There’s something in the way Taehyung lathers the bubbles and soaped water along Jungkook’s thigh, in how pliant Jungkook is under Taehyung’s hands, allowing Taehyung to do as he pleases. Taehyung switches to the other thigh at some point to drag the cloth along its side.

Jungkook jolts and winces.

Taehyung’s gaze darts on his face.

“I have a bruise from the fall there,” Jungkook explains.

Taehyung dives his free palm underwater and he sprawls it on the side of Jungkook’s thigh. “I’m gonna do something. Tell me if it helps.”

“Okay,” Jungkook says, and something content rumbles within Taehyung’s mind at how easily Jungkook agrees without asking any question.

Taehyung summons his lightning, the tiny bolts’ intensity weakened. He lets it coat his hand and the electrical pulses coil around his fingers, the small tendrils flicking the spot where Taehyung assumes the bruise to be.

Jungkook startles. “Oh?”

“Does it hurt? It shouldn’t.”

“It doesn’t. It tingles a bit, it feels nice.” Jungkook sinks more against the side of the tub.

“Does it help with the pain?” Taehyung worries and he’s careful when he massages the sore spot.

“Mhm… It feels really good.”

With Jungkook’s approval, Taehyung continues his ministration.

He keeps alleviating the ache in Jungkook’s thigh with one hand while resuming its cleaning with the other, brushing the cloth on the inner side of the leg. Jungkook’s eyes lids fall shut, so damn trusting.

Taehyung doesn’t feel deserving of it.

His guts uncomfortably churn when the memory of Jungkook falling through the door flashes in his head. Jungkook had reached for Taehyung then, and Taehyung hadn’t caught him.

Taehyung speaks, apprehensive.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” is Jungkook’s prompt answer.

“Even after I failed to catch you?”

“It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have anticipated this. No one could.”

“Still.”

“Still nothing. You won’t be able to catch me every time I fall, Taehyung. I don’t expect you to, and neither should you. But you can catch me in other ways.”

Taehyung meets Jungkook’s kind eyes.

“Like right now," Jungkook quietly carries on, "and I’ll be happy. I wasn’t mad at you, disappointed in you or anything like this. You’ve got nothing to feel guilty for.”

Taehyung averts his gaze and takes some distance to rinse the washcloth in the bath.

Jungkook straightens up. He shuffles to fold his legs under him, sitting between Taehyung’s legs. His hands rest upon Taehyung’s knees as he peers up at him. “I knew you’d look for me. I knew you were.”

“Of course I was,” Taehyung frowns.

“Exactly. That was more than enough for me. I knew you’d find me.”

“And what if I had not?”

“Then I would have figured a way out on my own. I can take care of myself just fine, Tae. But I like when I don’t have to all the time, when you’re the one doing so for me, just like I enjoy taking care of you.”

Taehyung is really stupid sometimes, he muses as he surveys Jungkook, the prince who has handled any and every problem that may have arisen.

“How dare you forget how powerful, smart and devious I am?” Jungkook challenges.

Taehyung huffs a chuckle. “Shut up.” He damps the washcloth again and leans forward. His hand curls around Jungkook’s nape while his other one begins to clean Jungkook’s neck. He doesn’t spend too much time here, not fond of erasing Jungkook’s natural scent that has been permeating his senses. “Are you happy?”

“I am."

“How do you feel?”

“Right now or in general?”

“Both.”

“In general, I feel good. I’m just relieved to be back home. And right now…” Jungkook’s gaze drifts across Taehyung’s face. “I feel cared for. A lot." He holds onto Taehyung’s wrist, his thumb pressing at the inner side. “And… I feel exposed? But in a good way. ‘Cause I know I’m safe. It feels good.”

“Do you feel safe?”

“I do. I am with you. No matter what happens, we have each other.”

“What if one day we don’t?”

“Then we’ll fall together.”

Something itchy and personal to Jungkook swirls in Taehyung’s chest. It’s new, yet it feels familiar.

A greed rises.

Perhaps it is similar to Jungkook’s own avarice, or perhaps it’s something else entirely. However it’s created for Jungkook, aimed at Jungkook, and given to him when Taehyung lifts Jungkook’s hand to brush his mouth on the knuckles. “We will,” Taehyung rasps against the ring.

They don’t speak for a while after this.

Peace encases them, and a boundless, deep-seated serenity sits in Taehyung’s mind, the last remnants of heartache that Jungkook’s disappearance had provoked now gone.

The warm fumes of the water cocoon them, and it’s as though time has stopped, where Taehyung and Jungkook float in this lull of intimacy that is proper to them. Every concern, every problem, every wound has been left outside the door, the two of them sheltered from the rest of the world.

It’s just Taehyung and Jungkook.

It’s them and the lanterns that bask their golden light across the walls. It’s Taehyung’s hands that slide across Jungkook’s arms, the skin so supple and velvety, so pleasant to graze upon. It’s also Taehyung’s fingers that discard the washcloth for a moment, preferring the skin on skin contact.

“Close your eyes,” Taehyung says. The compliance is immediate, and Taehyung rewards it with a *‘Good’* that he murmurs as he starts washing Jungkook’s face. Jungkook exhales and he melts even more if possible, becoming putty in Taehyung’s hands after that sole word.

Taehyung smiles.

Taehyung needed this: for everything to narrow down to Jungkook.

And so he carries on, cleaning Jungkook’s forehead, cheeks and temples. He’s always mindful of his motions, pacifying any sore spots he stumbles on. Jungkook shivers each time Taehyung’s lightning dances across his skin. Sometimes he even utters a low *‘Thank you’* that Taehyung responds to with a hum.

“Turn around for me.”

Jungkook does with a nod.

When Jungkook’s back is to Taehyung, the latter makes a movement to grab the washcloth, however Jungkook stops him.

“Can you use your hands instead? They feel better.”

Taehyung tosses the washcloth to scoop some bubbly water and drape it on Jungkook’s back. He starts at the shoulders, kneading and scrubbing his fingers there, then exploring lower along the sides and spine. Jungkook draws his legs up and rests his forehead on his knees, his happiness palpable where it interweaves with Taehyung's.

Jungkook mollifies even more as Taehyung softly rakes his nails up and down his spine, a shudder accompanied by goosebumps coursing through Jungkook's form. When Taehyung scratches lower, and Jungkook hisses with another shudder, his back arching.

Taehyung chuckles to himself.

Jungkook mumbles something, too intelligible to decipher.

"What did you say?"

"Said it feels so good."

"Does it feed you?"

"It feeds me, like… Dozens of loaves," Jungkook slurs. Taehyung's lips tug at the corners. "Does it feed you too?"

"I'm not hungry. At least not the same way you are."

Jungkook tilts his head backward, up until his eyes find Taehyung's. His hair dangles in the air, displaying his bleary, lidded gaze. "What do you mean?"

For once, Taehyung doesn't struggle as much to extricate the answer out of himself.

"I mean that I'd bake those loaves rather than eat them."

"Oh…"

This sole word is heavy in the room, brimming with an emotion that glazes Jungkook's eyes. Jungkook's lips tremble before parting around a shaky sigh, and Taehyung isn't surprised to see the few tears that drift down Jungkook's temples and fall in the water.

"I'm glad," Jungkook whispers. "Thank you."

"You've got nothing to thank me for."

"I'm really happy."

"That's good."

"Are you happy too?"

Taehyung gently wipes the corner of Jungkook's eyes. "I am now."

"I'm still hungry… Can I have one more?"

"In what way?"

"Any way you want."

Taehyung hesitates, unsure on what kind of fare would satiate Jungkook.

Would a caress be enough? A hold?

Or perhaps it can be something else, Taehyung muses. Maybe it'll be too much and Jungkook won't like it, but Taehyung does it anyway.

Taehyung palms drift under Jungkook's head to cup the back of it, the strands dangling between his fingers. He's not certain on what he's doing, but he simply follows his own greed. He also grants the dragon in him what it wants: more proximity with Jungkook.

Taehyung's head lowers until his bangs brush upon Jungkook's cheeks.

Then, Taehyung presses his lips on Jungkook's forehead in a feather-light, barely there touch.

He doesn't linger for long, partially because he's overwhelmed by the tenderness he can muster for Jungkook. However it seems to suffice for Jungkook who emits a happy hum that elevates in the room.

"Thank you," Jungkook says when Taehyung leans back.

"You're welcome." Taehyung clears his throat that feels a bit tight. He carefully tilts Jungkook's head forward; Jungkook's eyes are a little too open and honest, brimming with something Taehyung can't quite unravel. "I'll wash your hair now, yeah?"

"Okay." Jungkook sniffles and drops his head on his knees.

"I'll need you to straighten up a bit or the shampoo will go in your eyes," Taehyung warns and grabs the opened jar of shampoo that he scoops a knob in his palm.

"I'm really sleepy. M'feeling all… All tingly and fuzzy."

"Good?"

"Mhm. The best."

"You know you're safe here, right?"

"I know, 'think it's why."

Taehyung flattens his hand on Jungkook's crown to start spreading the product. Once he deems it good enough, he passes an arm over Jungkook's shoulder to cup the underside of the chin. He angles Jungkook's head backward, supporting it with his other hand when Jungkook does absolutely nothing to keep his head up.

Taehyung begins to shampoo Jungkook's hair. He scrubs the pulp of his fingers on the scalp, never forgetting to massage the temple here and there or focusing behind the ear. He sometimes uses the comb to smooth any tangle, and something a little selfish flares in him because he's the one using the comb *he* had carved himself for Jungkook. Jungkook allows *Taehyung* to touch and see him like this and—

Taehyung wants to scent Jungkook.

He won't yet. It can wait, and now is not the time, however the craving is rekindled at every new pass of the comb through the strands, or at every knead and graze of his fingers on Jungkook's skin.

Jungkook's eyes are closed, blissfully unaware of the turmoil he's awakening in Taehyung.

Taehyung resists the impulse at first. He detracts his mind with the shampoo and scalp massage. However Jungkook smells so good.

Taehyung manages to hold back perhaps two full minutes before his instincts take over.

He dips his face in Jungkook's neck, not quite touching. Just enough to get a whiff of the caramelized flowers and hint of grimness so characteristic of Jungkook's arcane.

"Did you smell me?"

Taehyung freezes. "Yes," he unabashedly answers and their faces are so close that their cheeks graze each other, Jungkook's breath tickling Taehyung's temple when he chuckles. He lazily continues to wash Jungkook's hair with the hand supporting the head.

Taehyung belatedly realizes the way the tip of his nose drags along the barren column of Jungkook's throat. It's not enough to be considered as scenting, but it still deposits a sliver of Taehyung's own scent onto Jungkook, and the dragon in Taehyung whines for more, so talkative since the night in the tent.

"Will you scent me again?"

"Later," Taehyung says to himself and Jungkook.

"M'kay."

Jungkook grows heavier and reclines more and more, reaching a point where Taehyung has to curl an arm around Jungkook's chest to pull him closer, up until Jungkook is leaned against Taehyung. The water on Jungkook's shoulders and hair seeps through Taehyung's shirt, but Taehyung doesn't mind it. He's holding Jungkook in his arms after all.

However, it is not enough.

Taehyung slings both of his arms over Jungkook's shoulders to let them dangle in front of Jungkook's chest. He folds his hands together in the water, pressing them on Jungkook's navel to pull him flush against him and…

There.

Much, much better.

Jungkook's head lolls the side and it bumps against Taehyung's arm where it finds support.

Taehyung exhales.

He dips his head forward to have a look at Jungkook's face, soft lips parted around slow puffs of air. Taehyung doesn't bother trying to hold himself back when he nuzzles the exposed throat again. Jungkook bares it even more even in his sleep, the motion reflexive rather than conscious. Taehyung huffs a chuckle underneath Jungkook's lobe.

Taehyung remains like this for a while but even as he grabs the washcloth to pass it over Jungkook's chest, he still stays close, not willing to part away yet.

Taehyung experiences a sentiment akin to reverence at how trusting Jungkook is with him, falling asleep in Taehyung's arms without a care in the world. Taehyung does not take it for granted. He fulfills it evermore as he carries on with the washing.

Taehyung catches the sparse scars on Jungkook's back. He had earlier as well but had not spoken a word about them. He passes his fingers over the round, brown one at the back of Jungkook's bicep.

"A cigar burn," Jungkook mumbles, still half asleep. "Seungwon did this the first time I met him. I wasn't obedient enough. He was smoking, I refused to kneel at his feet, so he burnt me." Taehyung clears his throat to chase away the faint staccato that rumbles in his breath pouch. Jungkook grabs Taehyung's wrist, guiding the hand to his hip where he few thin beige lines were cut. "That was him too, and Seohyung. She'd never hit me, she wouldn't dare leave any scar on me but… That day she had when I had tried to run away with Revna."

Taehyung gently touches Jungkook, a dichotomy to the violence that gnarls his mind. He does not say anything. He doesn't believe any word can help.

Instead he peers at Jungkook whose head turns.

Taehyung used to give 'arcane kisses' when he was a kid. He has grown out of these years ago, but they were once a way for him to learn how to control his different breaths and accustom himself to switching between this or that breath.

It feels right here, to kiss Jungkook with his arcane.

Taehyung presses his fingers against his own lips. He lets white bolts crackle out of his mouth, allowing them to curl around the fingertips.

He carries the kiss of lightning to Jungkook's hip, right where the few scars are. He brings the pads of his digits on his mouth again, and a kiss of wind is next, laid on the round scar on Jungkook's arm. The third kiss is made of fire, pressed on the apple of Jungkook's cheek that is tinted with a scar. Jungkook is unafraid of the tamed flames that graze upon his skin yet do not burn, simply caressing him.

The last kiss is of healing, this one placed right above Jungkook's heart.

"Taehyung…"

Jungkook shuffles in the tub to curl his arms around Taehyung's neck. Taehyung leans forward and hugs Jungkook, soothing Jungkook's tremors and quiet sobs.

Jungkook's tattoos spread over his shoulders, coloring his neck next as he reclines.

Jungkook blinks the few tears clinging onto his lashes, his eyes entirely black. His mouth parts open around raven flames. He presses his lips against the pad of his index and middle fingers on each hand, the flames coiling around them.

Jungkook carries his flames to Taehyung. He rests a kiss where Taehyung's breath pouch is, and the second is set above Taehyung's heart, both finding their home in Taehyung's chest as the flames dissipate.

Taehyung brushes his lips on Jungkook's forehead again because he doesn't know what else to do. Jungkook responds with a peck on Taehyung's cheek.

And the remainder of the bath elapses like this.

With instances of peaceful silence that stretch for a while, and others where Taehyung speaks to ask Jungkook how he feels when the latter wakes up from an impromptu nap. Jungkook responds every time, each one growing quieter.

Taehyung does not believe he has ever shared such an intimate moment with someone before. He never has, really, so much so that he knows he won't allow anyone else in the house tonight or tomorrow. He doesn't want any disturbances anymore.

Taehyung eventually wakes Jungkook up once more and says "Let's get you out of here, then I'll make you some food, hm?"

"'kay."

It takes some maneuvering because Jungkook's limbs don't work as they usually would. However Taehyung steps out of the tub to help Jungkook rise on his feet and rinse himself while Taehyung drains the water, the two of them uncaring of Jungkook's undressed state.

When Taehyung turns around minutes later, Jungkook is precariously standing in front of the bathtub, swaying from side to side.

Taehyung swiftly walks up to him and drapes the robe he has warmed with his fire breath on Jungkook's shoulders, helping him pass his arms through the sleeves. Taehyung guides Jungkook on the stool and once Jungkook is sitting down, Taehyung wraps a towel over Jungkook's head.

"There's already a pair of underwear on the sink counter," Taehyung starts," but I'll go fetch you some clothes while you dry yourself, yes?"

Jungkook nods.

Taehyung leaves and retrieves some of his own clothes moments later, including the gray, ribbed wool sweater that Jungkook has grown especially fond of. He makes his way back inside the bathroom to find Jungkook grimacing and bent over himself on the stool.

"Is the pain getting worse?"

"No. S'just—" Jungkook huffs. "Wanted to put lotion on, but I pulled on my ribs."

"I'll do it." Taehyung leaves his burden on the ground.

Jungkook hands the pot to Taehyung when Taehyung makes a motion for it. "Sure? You've done a lot already."

"I'm sure." Taehyung sniffs the content of the pot. Floral. "Where am I supposed to put this?"

"All over my body. It's a moisturizing cream," Jungkook explains, left in his underwear.

"No wonder your skin is so soft," Taehyung blurts as he crouches. He pauses, then he scoops some lotion and decides to pretend like he has not said a word, preferring to begin slathering the cream

on Jungkook’s calves.

Jungkook braces a hand on Taehyung’s shoulder. His skin pebbles when Taehyung kneads the lotion on the inner side of the upper thigh.

Jungkook’s skin is so nice to—

“Do you like touching me?”

A heat fills Taehyung’s ears. “You really have a knack to utter the most questionable yet honest things.”

“I’m just asking.”

“I know,” Taehyung chuckles. “Your skin is soft. It’s nice.”

“I’ll do my best to keep it soft, although sometimes it may not be,” Jungkook frowns. “Like if I have scars.”

“That’s more than fine.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“It’ll still be nice to touch?”

“It is.”

Jungkook leans forward to tuck his face in Taehyung’s neck, nestling his nose there.

“I thought your ribs hurt.”

“They do, but I want to be closer to you,” Jungkook mumbles. “S’ry. Feeling needy.”

“I don’t mind.” Taehyung carefully pushes Jungkook away to help him straighten up again. “Stay like this until I’m done. Don’t strain your ribs.” He halts for a few seconds, then he says “You can be closer to me later, yeah?”

Jungkook places a hand on Taehyung’s nape, playing with the hair there.

The moisturizing affair is as slow as the bath had been, neither Taehyung or Jungkook hurried to finish, and when he's done, he takes the other pot Jungkook hands to him.

"What's this one for?"

“My face," Jungkook replies.

“Why do you have so many products…”

“Because I can and want to.”

Taehyung snorts. “You sure can."

Jungkook smiles, expectantly looking up at Taehyung from where he's sitting on the stool.

Taehyung dots the cream on Jungkook's face like he has seen Jungkook do, then, with measured drags of his fingers, he smudges the lotion across Jungkook's skin. Jungkook closes his eyes, relaxed beneath Taehyung's hands.

Taehyung is hit again by how breathtaking Jungkook is as he presses the pads of his thumbs on Jungkook's cheeks. It's so soothing, more than anything Taehyung has ever done, and nearly as much as flying. Taehyung is even more appeased by how serene Jungkook looks, the latter's hands braced against Taehyung's thighs.

Jungkook shivers when Taehyung focuses under the lobes, and he hums when Taehyung focuses on the bridge of the nose and apple of the cheeks.

The curiosity that had arisen a while ago thrums alive as Taehyung delineates new notes of the song Jungkook's body sings.

The lotion has sunk into Jungkook's skin, yet Taehyung continues to graze Jungkook's face that he's caressing more than anything else by now. It's velvety, a little rough on the scar on the cheek, yet just as lovely to feel under his fingers.

Taehyung is happy.

It all brings forth the growing selfishness in Taehyung. This yearn to keep Jungkook to himself for a little longer.

The word 'greed' flickers in Taehyung's mind anew.

"I've told you being greedy is more than alright," Taehyung starts and Jungkook's eyes flutter open, "do you believe it's fine if other people are too?"

"Are you talking about yourself?" Jungkook asks, who always reads Taehyung like an open book.

Taehyung nods and another wave of relief rushes through him because he could have lost everything.

He could have lost Jungkook.

He has, even if for a fleeting moment.

"You can be greedy. I'd like it if you are. 'Cause it's reassuring to know I'm not the only one feeling like this. Are you feeling greedy?" Jungkook wonders, so full of hope that Taehyung does not bother denying a response.

"I am."

"You want to be greedy with me?"

Taehyung curtly nods. "I— Uh…" He brushes Jungkook's temple. "I like this."

"This?"

"Us together. I don't want anyone else to be in our house right now. Is that alright with you"

“*Please.*”

“Yeah?”

“Just you and me.”

Taehyung nods again, the words difficult to grab.

He lets go of Jungkook to gather the clothes he's brought and he aids Jungkook in dressing himself, like he had once done when Jungkook had had a nightmare. It’s just as nice as before. Taehyung would go as far as saying that it’s better here because his mind is silent, not plagued by any overthinking.

“Is there anything else to do?” Taehyung inquires and wipes his hands while Jungkook stands.

"Mhm, we're done."

Taehyung’s hand sprawls on Jungkook’s lower back and he discards how the dragon in him whines to scent Jungkook. “Come on," he says and leads Jungkook out. “I’ll cook us dinner."

Jungkook holds Taehyung’s arm against his chest, heavily leaning on him. “But I already got my fare," he says and props his chin on Taehyung’s shoulder. There’s a cheeky smile on his lips that Taehyung shakes his head to.

“How about a tangible, proper meal?”

“Yours’ better.”

“I’ll still be the one cooking, so still my food.”

“Oh.” Jungkook perks up. “Right. That’s true.”

They climb down the stairs, Taehyung keeping a close eye on Jungkook’s unsteady steps.

Revna is in the living room, now cuddled up under a blanket in Taehyung’s armchair. Taehyung guides Jungkook there but Jungkook protests.

“What is it?”

“Too far.”

So Taehyung takes Jungkook to the kitchen with him.

Once inside, Taehyung grasps Jungkook by the waist and lifts him to place him on the counter, right at the corner of the room to ensure that Jungkook is safely tucked against the wall. “You’re good here?”

Jungkook hums with a lazy nod and blink.

After closing the curtains and effectively shielding them from any prying eye, Taehyung begins to gather the griffin meat, some vegetable and rice, and he launches himself into the meal’s preparations.

Taehyung catches in the corner of his eyes how Jungkook draws his legs up and curls onto himself. “Are you cold?”

Jungkook wordlessly nods.

Half a minute later, Jungkook is cocooned in a blanket that Taehyung tightly wraps around his form. His face is a little puffy, his hair a drying bird’s nest that sticks in different directions. There’s a faint rosy tint on his cheeks, remnants of the hot bath he took.

Jungkook is quite…

Cute.

Jungkook is *cute,* which is a weird thought to have because Taehyung has never really considered anyone cute. But Jungkook looks so sleepy and his cheek is squished atop his knees, puckering his lips a bit and—

Yeah.

Jungkook is really cute.

There’s nothing groundbreaking about it, but for some reason, the realization renders Taehyung a tad awkward because why does he have to fight the impulse to poke the dimple in Jungkook’s cheek? It’s stupid, really, and he shoves down the heretic urge.

“Are you comfortable?” Taehyung asks and Jungkook’s response is mute again. “Why aren’t you talking?”

Jungkook hums. He slowly rubs his face on the blanket covering his legs. He props his cheek there again — *that bunches cutely* — and he peers at Taehyung with droopy eyes.

“Is it because you’re sleepy?” Taehyung continues. Jungkook nods. “Are you still feeling fuzzy? Dizzy too?” When the answer is a mute *‘Yes’,* Taehyung presses the back of his hand on Jungkook’s forehead. It isn’t abnormally warm. “It’s probably because of the healing potion. It’ll pass, yeah? Just stay here and tell me if you want anything. Drink too,” he adds with a nod of his chin toward the glass of water next to Jungkook.

Taehyung keeps Jungkook in his peripheral vision as he continues to cook.

At some point, Jungkook requests Taehyung’s attention by pulling on Taehyung’s shirt. Taehyung understands the demand and he shuffles in front of Jungkook who immediately brings Taehyung into an embrace.

“You’re clingy,” Taehyung says but he’s the one to pull Jungkook closer.

The hypocrite.

Jungkook weakly nips at Taehyung’s neck.

“I need to finish cooking.” Taehyung reminds Jungkook but also himself when he drags a palm up and down Jungkook’s spine. “Jungkook. Come on.”

Jungkook emits a drawn out sigh but reclines, arms slung around Taehyung’s neck.

Jungkook moves away from Taehyung seconds later and folds into himself as if he hasn't sent Taehyung into a whirlwind of *'Why did he actually stop the hug already?'* and *'Why does it matter if he stopped so soon?'*

Taehyung gets back to work so that he doesn't stand there staring at Jungkook like a fucking idiot.

Half an hour later, dinner is done and Jungkook is settled on a chair.

Taehyung serves a half asleep Jungkook first. His gaze is watchful as he observes the way Jungkook picks up his chopsticks. Jungkook's hand trembles when it tries to scoop some rice. It doesn't get to lift very high before the chopsticks fall from his grasp, deftly caught by Taehyung.

"Sorry. I'm just— Feeling like cotton."

"It's fine." Taehyung serves himself next, placing his bowl and plate on Jungkook's right where he finds his place and sits down. He grips the edge of Jungkook's seat that he pulls closer, up until their knees knock together.

"Sorry," Jungkook reiterates and rests a hand on Taehyung's thigh.

"You've got nothing to apologize for."

"Okay." Jungkook slumps in his chair. "Thank you."

Taehyung bites on the inside of his cheek to refrain himself from uttering that one word he has now banished from his mind.

Taehyung gathers some griffin meat and rice for Jungkook. He cups the back of Jungkook's head, both to offer himself a good anchor and some support to Jungkook. And also because Taehyung simply wants to touch Jungkook's nape and perhaps rub his inner wrist there in a subtle scenting. Thankfully, Jungkook is none the wiser, Taehyung is happy.

Taehyung presents the bite to Jungkook.

Jungkook stares at the chopsticks then peers at Taehyung.

"Eat," Taehyung instructs.

"You're literally feeding me?"

"Yes. Because you clearly can't do it yourself right now."

Taehyung expects Jungkook to petulantly frown, but instead Jungkook smiles and parts his mouth, allowing Taehyung to feed him. Taehyung gathers another bite and this time Jungkook does glower when Taehyung is the one to eat it.

Akin to when Taehyung had fed an unconscious Jungkook in the forest, doing so right now is even more pleasing, whether it be when Taehyung brings another bite to Jungkook, or when he helps him drink as well, Jungkook's body sapped of its energy. There's even a grain of rice that remains stuck at the corner of Jungkook's mouth, and Taehyung plucks it then eats it himself. Jungkook mumbles a *'Thank you'* against Taehyung's cheek that he briefly nuzzles then pecks.

Elders…

Taehyung really, *really* likes this.

Jungkook seems to awaken better the more they eat together, fed by Taehyung, his thumb drawing circles on Taehyung's knee.

"I don't want to go to bed yet," Jungkook says when they're done eating, their plates empty.

"Then we won't."

"I want to cuddle on the couch."

Taehyung wordlessly guides Jungkook to the living room.

He does not question it when he sits in the corner of the L couch and allows Jungkook to settle between his legs with his back to Taehyung's chest. Taehyung throws the blanket over them and stretches his legs on the sofa, then he heaves a deep sigh.

Jungkook sags against Taehyung, comfortably nestled there. He falls asleep within minutes.

Taehyung internally chuckles. He entangles his hands above Jungkook's navel, what sliver of amusement in him vanishing when his mind reels back to all that has gone down in the past few days. His arms tighten their hold around Jungkook, and he presses his mouth against Jungkook's shoulder, peering ahead at Revna.

He remains like this for a while until a voice startles him.

"Did you miss me?"

"You were sleeping," Taehyung mutters.

"Did you?"

Taehyung doesn't hesitate for long before giving his answer.

"I did."

"I missed you too." His hands slide down Taehyung's forearms, his fingers slipping between Taehyung's. "Were you angry when I was gone?"

"Yes."

"You seemed calm when I saw you."

"Because I had to be, or I wouldn't have been able to think properly. I already couldn't."

"Did you want to kill those who took me?"

"Yes..."

Jungkook makes a pleased sound. "Isn't it odd?"

"What is?"

“You say your chaos finds peace in me, meanwhile I find peace in your chaos. It’s so warm and tender with me, while violent with others,” Jungkook whispers. “I felt so serene when I saw you rip the sky open. I’m very fond of your chaos, Tae.”

A relief born from a place so old washes over Taehyung. He exhales and closes his eyes. He never knew he had been craving this: someone who cherishes his chaos rather than fear it. When his lids flutter open again, Taehyung watches his and Jungkook’s intertwined fingers, how their rings glint under the lantern’s lights.

“Were you scared?”

“More than I was angry,” Taehyung rasps.

“Really?”

Taehyung hums.

“Tae?”

“Yes?”

“What would you do if I’m killed?”

Taehyung isn’t perturbed by the question, having heard more eccentric ones from Jungkook.

“I’d hunt down those who killed you.”

“And what would you do once they’ve died?”

“I’d take care of her,” Taehyung says with a glance at the sleeping Revna. “And then I don’t know.” His lips pinch together. He reclines against the backrest and he unfolds his arms from around Jungkook to tighten them over his own chest where he can feel a dull, distant throe near his heart. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“Sorry. Was some weird questions.”

“You don’t say.”

Jungkook turns to sit sideways between Taehyung’s legs. He breathes in Taehyung’s neck and presses his side flush against Taehyung. “Can you—” Taehyung hugs Jungkook’s waist before Jungkook can finish. “Thank you,” Jungkook sighs. “I want to be closer to you.”

“I don’t think we can possibly be any closer.”

“Sometimes I want to crawl inside your chest and stay there.”

Taehyung peers down when he feels a hand rubs his chest and he’d be concerned by the gesture trailing the words if it had been anyone other than Jungkook.

“That was also weird,” Jungkook observes.

“Not the weirdest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I’m not saying that I’ll tear your chest open to crawl in it but— You know. Anyway. Making it worse,” Jungkook mumbles and buries his face against Taehyung’s shoulder

Taehyung tilts his head back atop the sofa. He chuckles but it’s a little strained because the disappearance had left Taehyung so unexpectedly empty and lonely.

“I was surprised you cried.”

Taehyung stares at the ceiling that blurs. His eyes sting and his throat clicks when he swallows around the lump stifling him. “I was really scared,” he confesses in a rasp.

“You looked…” Jungkook fiddles with the hem of Taehyung’s shirt before flattening his palm on Taehyung’s navel. “You looked so heartbroken.”

Because Taehyung had felt as such.

“Were you?”

“Yes,” Taehyung whispers, still affected by everything.

Jungkook shuffles to straddle Taehyung. His palms gently cup Taehyung’s cheeks.

Taehyung does not budge when Jungkook moves forward until their foreheads touch, their noses bumping together. Jungkook tilts his head to the side, and Taehyung still does not move when the tip of Jungkook’s nose traces a feather-light path on Taehyung’s cheek. The lips are next on the same spot and they mumble something intelligible in an aerial caress that tickles Taehyung.

The motions are gorged with a tenderness that pulls at the tears clouding Taehyung’s eyes. It’d be overwhelming if Taehyung wasn’t soothed by the way Jungkook ever so softly takes the fragments of Taehyung’s heart and sews them back together piece by piece.

Jungkook’s face is hazy above Taehyung’s, then a little less when Taehyung blinks.

“You’re crying,” Jungkook murmurs, his thumb wiping Taehyung’s temples. “Are you happy?”

Taehyung nods, not trusting his voice.

Jungkook smiles, as gentle as the kiss he leaves on Taehyung’s forehead. “Are you relieved I’m here?” This time when Taehyung nods, Jungkook nuzzles their noses together with a chuckle. “Did you miss me?”

Taehyung answers the same way once more, drops trickling down his temples one after another.

“I missed you, Tae.”

“I missed you too,” Taehyung murmurs.

Taehyung doesn’t know why he’s crying as he gazes up at Jungkook. His heart aches. The dragon in him aches. His arcane does too, longing for something he doesn’t know, and Taehyung has to muffle a sob because of course Jungkook understands without needing words.

Jungkook’s eyes darken as he reduces the distance even more, and Taehyung closes his eyes when a pair of lips adorned with flames softly kisses his tears away. The more kisses are carried to

Taehyung's chest where Jungkook's mouth presses.

One on the left, for the slowly beating heart.

One above the breath pouch, for Taehyung's arcane.

Taehyung can nearly feel the cold flames that seep through his shirt, skin and bones, and it's as though they find his arcane because his seven breaths all float into a peaceful lull.

Taehyung never knew a kiss of death could be so warm and comforting.

Taehyung wakes up alone in bed.

He springs up. A cold sweat blooms on his spine, blood roaring in his head. Before the panic can swallow him whole, his ears catch onto the sound of running water coming from the bathroom. Taehyung throws the blankets off himself and with still bleary eyes, he walks out of the bedroom toward the bathroom.

Jungkook is inside.

He's brushing his teeth, a headband keeping his hair off his face.

Taehyung slumps against the door-frame as the fear dissipates, the palpitations of his heart slowing down. "You weren't there." He doesn't mean to sound so accusatory but he doesn't anyway.

"Morning," Jungkook says and rinses his mouth. "I didn't want to wake you up."

"You can next time. Please," Taehyung says after a beat. "I just— I'm still a bit on edge and waking up to you not being there was—"

"I'm sorry." Jungkook makes his way toward Taehyung to pull him in a hug. "I'll wake you up next time. I promise."

"Yeah," Taehyung says and reciprocates the embrace. "How are your wounds?"

"Just a little sore, but other than that, I'm good. I'm still a bit out of it? Not as much as yesterday though. And—" Jungkook clears his throat as he steps away from Taehyung. His cheeks are flushed, his neck and tip of the ears coloring soon as well. "I… Uhm. About yesterday… I'm sorry if I was too much. I don't know what came over me. I was—" Another pause. "I was very… clingy."

"I didn't mind."

Jungkook's gaze is searching as it drags across Taehyung's face. "You didn't?"

"I didn't."

"Did you like it?"

“I did.”

“Okay.” Jungkook lifts a hand to his mouth. “If you really didn’t mind…” He averts his gaze. “Can we do it again?”

“Now?” Taehyung wonders and Jungkook nods. “We can.” He moves toward the bathtub that he begins to fill with water. “Come here.”

Taehyung washes Jungkook again, and akin to yesterday, the task is both fulfilling and soothing. Taehyung won’t speak a word about it yet, but he wouldn’t mind if it were to become a routine between them, where Taehyung is allowed to participate a little more in Jungkook’s self-care. The bath leaves Jungkook mollified, *soft,* for lack of a better word, and Taehyung curiously watches Jungkook.

An hour later, both showered and dressed, Jungkook helps Taehyung in the making of their breakfast.

However, as they go through their tasks, there’s something about the way Jungkook behaves that Taehyung can’t help but study.

Jungkook had mentioned in the past that he likes listening to Taehyung, and this morning is one of those instances where it becomes especially blatant.

Jungkook keeps expectantly looking at Taehyung, clearly waiting for a new instruction once done with the previous one Taehyung has given him. He also does not shy away from demanding words of approval if the way he brandishes a bowl of perfectly cut scallions is any hint. Taehyung gives them, of course, because Jungkook has done a good job, but also because Taehyung does not believe there isn’t much he wouldn’t give to Jungkook.

So Jungkook grows even ‘softer’.

He hums to himself, chuckles and smiles when Taehyung utters a *‘Good’,* and he always touches Taehyung in some way every few minutes.

Jungkook is so damn clingy and Taehyung wouldn’t have it any other way. The opposite, actually, which is probably why *Taehyung* is the one reaching out for Jungkook when the latter is a little too far or hasn’t given any attention to Taehyung for more than five minutes.

It’s disgustingly domestic, the way the two of them naturally navigate around each other in the kitchen.

Taehyung loves it.

There are other moments that are a little less soft, and a lot more curious.

Jungkook becomes more teasing and playful. He dips a finger in the sauce Taehyung has made in spite of Taehyung’s warning, only to then dart away with a snicker when Taehyung makes a move to bat Jungkook’s hand away.

Then, there are instances when Jungkook tilts his head *just right,* exposing the side of his neck.

It renders Taehyung a little dizzy.

Taehyung is fairly certain that Jungkook does it on purpose, either to be a brat or to provoke Taehyung into scenting him.

Probably both.

It reminds Taehyung of how Jungkook had been in the tent, how it had then echoed with the behavior Taehyung has seen happen between mates and lovers. Which is confusing, really, because Jungkook has no reason to behave like this with Taehyung. They aren't lovers after all, let alone mates, plus Jungkook is a human and not a dragonborn.

Yet Taehyung wonders now.

Do humans have some kind of dominance hierarchy too that they enjoy? Do they have a tradition similar to dragonborns' mating chase, perhaps?

Taehyung isn't certain, but he's curious nonetheless, and he feels a little testing.

Taehyung hands some eggs for Jungkook to crack, and he doesn't need to ask for Jungkook to get to work.

"How did you manage to find me once you got on the island?" Jungkook asks after Taehyung has recounted the making of the spell while omitting its impact on Revna, a discussion for later.

"I hunted you." Taehyung carefully phrases. He observes the way Jungkook pauses. A waft of caramel travels through the kitchen, and Taehyung internally snorts. "It was easier on me to think of it as a hunt rather than as a search," he carries on and when the sugary scent suffuses his nose even more, he levels Jungkook with a deadpan look. " *Really?* "

"What?" Jungkook mutters, suddenly absorbed in the eggs.

"I can literally smell how much you liked what I just said."

"Talk about invasion of privacy."

"I can't control what I can smell."

"What if I plug your nose though?"

"Try me."

"It's not my fault if I like it."

"The idea of me hunting you?" The caramel sharpens. Taehyung chuckles when Jungkook smacks his arm.

"We could have that chase. But for fun. Not because I was abducted," Jungkook adds. "At first I could be the one catching you, and then you could be the one trying to catch me. Emphasize on 'try'."

Taehyung scoffs. "I'd catch you easily."

"There's only one way to find out."

Taehyung peers at Jungkook who looks back at him, Jungkook's eyes full of mirth and expectations.

Taehyung sighs.

"That was a yes!"

Taehyung turns around to rummage through a cupboard and most importantly hide the stupid smile that threatens to split his face in half. "Whatever," he mutters and *Elders.* He missed this brat.

"Plus you said in the tent it could be used to determine certain things, no?"

"I also said we probably don't need this to determine anything."

"Aaand, you never clarified why. Do you need anything else?" Jungkook asks when Taehyung settles on his left again.

"A jar of spice," Taehyung answers and Jungkook gives it to him. "Can you fetch me the salt and pepper too?" Jungkook immediately obeys. "And the bag of herbs."

Jungkook obeys every single request Taehyung utters, and Taehyung rewards them with words of approval or a hand on Jungkook's nape that the latter visibly preens under.

Taehyung finishes his drink and he watches with amusement the way Jungkook serves Taehyung a new glass of water, even if Taehyung hasn't spoken a word. "Why don't you drink some water too?" Taehyung says and Jungkook does so from Taehyung's glass. Taehyung cups the back of Jungkook's neck while the latter chats about a matter Taehyung does not listen to. Jungkook tilts his head and his words falter when Taehyung kneads his thumb under the lobe. "Are you that oblivious?"

Jungkook barks out a laugh that resounds in the kitchen. "I cannot believe that *you,* of all people, asked me this."

"Yeah, I did," Taehyung says but it sounds more like a challenge. It's effortless when he twists Jungkook around to cage him against the kitchen island. "Because you ask me why we wouldn't need a chase to determine anything, yet in the same breath you bare your neck to me, eagerly comply with any request I may have, even those that I don't speak out loud. So, asking again: are you that oblivious?"

"I—" Jungkook glowers but the effect is lessened by his flaming ears. "I don't eagerly do anything," he states. Taehyung quirks a brow. "I don't!"

"Sure." Taehyung releases his hold on Jungkook's nape to resume the preparations of the breakfast.

"I just like doing things for you. You like doing things for me too. You bathed me. *Twice.* " Jungkook emphasizes with a proud curl to his lips.

"Yes, but there's a world of difference in how we do it."

"How so?"

"Let's say I cook for you: I'll do it because I like taking care of you." Taehyung surveys Jungkook. "Meanwhile if you're the one cooking: you'll do it because you like being good for me, and you

clearly enjoy it when it's acknowledged."

Jungkook gawks at Taehyung before his head swivels around. "First of all, I don't like being good for you."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"What happened to not lying?"

"Shut up, you prick. I strongly dislike how more emotionally capable you're becoming."

Taehyung hums. "Can you grab a bowl for me?"

The answer is expected.

"No."

"You do realize that you refusing to do it after I've pointed it out only makes it more blatant, right?"

"Nevertheless," Jungkook says with a dismissive wave of his hand, "I want to do that wedding tradition. Will we have it?"

"We'll have to figure out the when," Taehyung answers.

The chase could be fun.

Jungkook pecks Taehyung's cheek. "I missed you so much," he sighs and slings his arms around Taehyung's waist as he rests his head on his shoulder. "I didn't realize how much until I saw you and came back home."

Taehyung says naught, instead feeding a piece of fried egg to Jungkook.

"Namjoon told me you were really scary." Jungkook muffles his chuckles on Taehyung's shoulder. "That it kept storming and raining everywhere you went."

"The storm was the only way I had to… To control my arcane and myself, so to say."

"Is it wrong that I find it charming instead of scary? I know it happened because you were distressed, but you still created something… Monstrous. Yet beautiful." Jungkook sits on the kitchen island. "I love your chaos."

"Well you're certainly the only one thinking this. The others were scared of me because they have common sense and survival instincts, unlike some." Taehyung aims a pointed look at Jungkook. "And get down. I'm cooking there."

Jungkook jumps down with a huff. "Say, how did you break the veil?"

"Sound." Taehyung explains in more detail the reasoning behind the hurricane he had made, and Jungkook has this *look* on his face. Taehyung doesn't squirm under it, but he does feel a sense of shy pride swell in him. Taehyung even mentions the book he has written about his research.

“Could I read it?” Jungkook wonders.

“Sure. S’nothing crazy or eloquent.”

“And? It’ll be interesting because you wrote it. Plus I’ll get to learn more about arcane.”

“I have a copy somewhere in the bedroom. I’ll look for it later.”

As Taehyung anticipates it, Jungkook kisses his cheek with a *‘Thank you’* then skips to the dining area to start plating the table.

“Did you show the book to Areum? I’m sure he would have loved reading it.”

Taehyung peers at Jungkook who’s laying plates on the dining table. A certain fondness for the prince itches in Taehyung’s chest. “I did, actually. He loved it.”

“We should bring him here one day,” Jungkook distractedly says. “I could present Revna to him as well.”

“You really wouldn’t mind if he visits us? He can be a bit destructive without meaning to, and he’s easily excitable, so he can be a handful sometimes.”

“I wouldn’t mind at all. Areum is cute. I like him.”

Taehyung looks away from Jungkook and focuses on his chopping lest he says something humiliating like *‘Thank you for caring for what and who I care about so much, but please, stop, because I kinda feel like crying now’.* And Taehyung isn’t even chopping any onions he can blame any tears on, which would be even more humiliating.

They both eat their breakfast minutes later. They chat together and it never really stops, as if they both need to hear the other’s voice and make sure they’re here with fleeting touches.

Or perhaps only Taehyung experiences this.

A discomfort flares in Taehyung as the day elapses.

He and Jungkook are loitering in their living room while checking up on Revna who wakes up once to devour a whole chicken then falls back asleep.

Taehyung knows what prompts the restlessness and what should be done to appease it.

The first step would be simple: scenting Jungkook, because Jungkook doesn’t smell enough like Taehyung.

It’s the second step that is more complicated to achieve. It's been a while since the last time Taehyung has done it, but the urge to go through it right now is acute. His home and peace were disturbed, his arcane and dragon in him too.

Taehyung manages to fight off the increasing urge for hours, however when it's clear that it won't go away, he caves in.

"I need to… Do some stuff. In the house," Taehyung announces and pushes Jungkook's legs from his lap to stand. "Don't venture far?"

"Do I look like I'm about to go anywhere?" Jungkook says, who is laid on his back and enveloped in a blanket, a bowl of snacks on his chest where Revna is sprawled on. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just need to do something." Taehyung fidgets on his spot, a certain eagerness now awakening. "Don't come into the bedroom for now, and if you need anything just call my name, yeah?"

"Mhm, will do."

Taehyung curtly nods and walks away. He's at the foot of the stairs when Jungkook speaks.

"You forgot something."

"What?"

"A kiss."

Taehyung throws a stony stare at Jungkook. "I'm not kissing you."

"I don't mean on the lips."

"I figured you didn't mean on the lips because why would it be my first assumption?"

"I meant on my forehead."

"I'm not kissing your forehead."

"You did yesterday."

"A moment of weakness," Taehyung declares and, really, the happiness that flows in him when Jungkook's laughter rings in the house is ridiculous. Taehyung *did that.*

"Do it again."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"What if I pout?"

"Then pout."

Jungkook obliges, looking all sad, and it's embarrassing that it nearly works because it *does* yank on the tug in Taehyung's chest. "Tae. Please."

"I said no." On these last words, Taehyung marches up the stairs.

“You’re a terrible husband! I’ll be sulking until further notice!”

A smile floats on Taehyung’s lips.

Taehyung enters the bedroom and he leaves the door open to be able to hear Jungkook downstairs. He observes the area for a moment, mentally cataloging the bed but also the chest underneath it that he knows to be full of geodes and gems.

Taehyung gets to work.

While he does enjoy being dragonborn, rare are the times where he actually indulges his draconic instincts. It’s partially because he never feels the need to, but also due to the fact that he always had to keep his heritage of a chaos dragon in a tight leash and muzzle.

Taehyung doesn’t hoard very often. If ever now. He would sparsely gather geodes and gems — like a typical dragon — when he was a kid and in his teenage years, but it stopped when he had reached 16 or 17 years old. The last time Taehyung had hoarded must have been six years ago, after all that had gone down with the man with the scent.

So Taehyung is lost on how to proceed now.

He also doesn’t understand why the entire bedroom feels off all of a sudden. It’s as if nothing is at the right place and *why is the mattress on the bed frame?* It should be on the ground.

Taehyung throws the pillows and sheets away to lift the mattress and drop it down. It's much better. Although still not good. The mattress is too out in the open. Unsafe. So Taehyung drags it to the top right corner of the bedroom where he tucks the mattress.

It’s pretty nice like this, perfect to cushion and protect Taehyung’s most prized possessions.

He starts with the opened geodes that he takes from the chest and neatly places on the mattress. But it’s too barren now and so Taehyung takes a blanket that he lays on the mattress and *yes* . Yes. Much better. More comfortable. It could use some more pillows and blankets though. The hoard is not quite right yet.

Taehyung snatches more comforters and cushions from the walk-in dresser. He sniffs them.

Laundry.

He doesn’t like it.

He walks down to the living room, armed with his pile that he drops on Jungkook’s lap after noticing Revna back in The Armchair.

Jungkook rapidly blinks. “Yes?”

“Can you rub your face and neck on them?”

“Why?”

That is a good question Taehyung doesn’t know the answer to.

So he deflects.

“Can you?”

Jungkook does as Taehyung asked and brushes his face, neck but also his inner wrists on the pile drowning him. Taehyung checks them one by one. Some aren’t good enough and so Taehyung gives them back to Jungkook so the latter can do it again.

After a while, Taehyung sniffs the armada of pillows and blankets. Satisfied with Jungkook’s job, Taehyung nods to himself and brings them back to the bedroom.

Taehyung arranges the assortment of cushions in his hoard and before he knows it, he’s formed some kind of cocoon lining up the mattress. He leans forward on his hands to smell the hoard here and there. He hums when he can pick up on the floral and grim hints. He also moves around some of the geodes and gems because now *they* are the ones that aren’t well placed anymore. If he sometimes spends several minutes admiring some of them, no one has to know.

Taehyung must spend half an hour making the hoard.

A half hour that turns into two full hours.

He doesn’t mean to take so long, but every time he believes himself to be done, something has to be missing, be at the wrong spot or slightly too bunched up or, on the contrary, not fluffed out enough. He adds more pillows as well to make it more comfortable to lay on because no sensible human can ever have too many pillows.

Taehyung does not stop there.

He removes his shirt to put on a new one before joining Jungkook again.

“Let’s swap shirts.”

Jungkook wordlessly removes his ribbed wool sweater and shirt, giving both to Taehyung. He still does not ask any question when he’s handed Taehyung’s shirt that he slides on.

“Thanks,” is all that Taehyung says before disappearing again.

Taehyung carefully stretches the sweater and shirt in the hoard. He pays extra care with them, rearranging them until they’re sprawled higher up the mattress. He also grabs more of his and Jungkook’s clothes from the dresser to add them to the hoard.

It’s only after closing the curtains, the room now dimly lit by the sun, that Taehyung crouches in front of the hoard and deeply breathes in.

Flower. Petrichor. Caramel. Smoke. *Them.* And this characteristic aspect of Jungkook’s arcane.

“Fuck.” Taehyung sways at the blend of his and Jungkook’s scents from where he’s knelt.

This is close to perfection.

His restlessness is almost fully gone, the hoard is nearly complete, but it’s still missing the most important thing.

When Taehyung goes downstairs for the third time, he finds Jungkook standing in the kitchen and serving himself some tea. Taehyung walks up to him as Jungkook turns around. He removes the

cup from Jungkook's hand.

Then, he unceremoniously throws Jungkook over his shoulder.

"Taehyung?!"

Taehyung loops an arm around Jungkook to secure him on his shoulder while he takes the cup and climbs up the stairs.

Jungkook grips onto the back of Taehyung's shirt. "Did you at least take my cup?"

"Yes."

Jungkook huffs.

Taehyung closes the bedroom door with his foot. He deposits the cup on a dresser and walks up to the hoard where he — gently — lays Jungkook on, mindful of the still tender ribs.

Taehyung peers down at Jungkook.

Jungkook is sprawled in the middle of the mattress, his head moving left and right, evidently confused.

It's perfect.

As though everything has finally fallen into place, as though the missing piece of the puzzle has been found and slotted in its spot, an unadulterated peace swathes Taehyung.

Taehyung sighs as he crouches. He crawls up the mattress to kneel right between Jungkook's legs that he pulls apart. He shifts the placement of some of the pillows to snug one under Jungkook's head. Jungkook shuffles around then winces and Taehyung removes the amethyst geode digging into Jungkook's back that he tosses it over his shoulder.

"Why is the mattress on the ground?"

"Because."

"And why are there— Are these geodes?"

"Yes," Taehyung distractedly answers because the pillow he had slid under Jungkook's head isn't good enough and so he replaces it with a more cushiony one. That is, once again, much better.

"What's going on…?"

"You were gone. You've got to be here," Taehyung explains like it makes any sense to himself or Jungkook.

"Why?"

"'Cause… Because. Yes."

Jungkook's gaze turns playful. "Is the reptile part of your brain at the origin of what is currently happening?"

Taehyung mutters through pursed lips at the wording. “Also yes. It’s a hoard.”

“Dragons actually hoard?”

“Yes.”

Jungkook emits an *‘Oooh’*. “What do dragonborns hoard?”

“Whatever they want and like. It can be anything.”

“Anything?”

Taehyung surveys Jungkook. “You’re wondering if it can be bones or something like that, aren’t you?”

Jungkook flushes. “I mean—” He pouts. “Yes…”

“I’ve never heard of a dragonborn hoarding corpses, but Hoseok does know one that hoards animal bones. He was freaked out by them.”

Jungkook gasps. “Really?” Taehyung nods. “Did you find it weird?” Jungkook asks and Taehyung shakes his head.

“Do humans hoard?”

“We don’t hoard but we do collect things.”

“What kind of things?”

“It can be anything too. There was this grandma I’d visit sometimes who was a huge teapot collector.”

“That sounds like hoarding.”

Jungkook chuckles. “I suppose it’s very similar.” He pauses to glance at Taehyung then avert his gaze. “So, hypothetically, if I want to collect bones, you wouldn’t be disturbed by it?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You’re sure?” Jungkook presses and his hands lift to fidget with the front of Taehyung’s shirt. “It’s bizarre, but I find bones and skeletons pretty? And interesting to study. Which I entirely blame on my necromancy, of course. Partially.”

“You can collect whatever you want.”

“But it’s still your house too. Not everyone wants to enter their living room and see an array of skeletons nailed in a glass case.”

Taehyung laughs and Jungkook follows him with his own. “I won’t be bothered by it. It’s your house, you can bring anything you want here.”

Jungkook elegantly arches a brow. “Anything *and* anyone?”

“Woobin is out of the question.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter. “How did you know I was about to mention him!"

“‘Cause I know you,” Taehyung says and cups Jungkook’s waist. “Can I pull the shirt up?”

“You can remove it if you want?”

“No.” Taehyung would rather still have Jungkook wearing the shirt Taehyung had previously on. “Just gonna push it up.” He does as such, his hands sliding beneath the black top to sprawl on Jungkook’s side and bunch the shirt up his chest. It allows more places for Taehyung to rub his wrists on.

“You’re gonna scent me?” Jungkook smiles when Taehyung nods. He makes himself more comfortable on the mattress, right where he’s settled at the middle of the cocoon of blankets and pillows. His fingers slip under the sleeves of Taehyung’s shirt, curling around the biceps.

Taehyung sags above Jungkook.

Jungkook is here and safe, smelling so good, although not as best as he could.

Taehyung drags his nose on the curve of Jungkook’s throat. He allows his lips to follow the same path, enjoying the sensation of Jungkook’s soft skin that he had covered in lotion earlier this morning. He had made sure to not wash Jungkook’s neck much when he had bathed him, and Taehyung is grateful for his forward thinking as he focuses on this spot for a while.

The hand that Jungkook places on Taehyung’s nape shushes any kind of protest Taehyung’s mind may conjure, any *‘You shouldn’t be doing this’* or *‘Why are you doing this?’* that may have unconsciously flickered. Instead, they’re replaced by greedy thoughts and a dumbed down *‘More’* that Taehyung doesn’t bother chasing away.

“Do I smell good?”

“Yes.” Taehyung frees one of his hands to cup the side of Jungkook’s throat. Jungkook responds to the implied demand and he tilts his head to the side, giving free rein for Taehyung to dive there. Taehyung chuckles when Jungkook shivers below him.

“Don’t mock me.”

“Does it feel nice?”

“Really nice...”

Pleased by the answer, Taehyung lowers down Jungkook’s neck while Jungkook brushes his inner wrists on Taehyung’s neck. Taehyung hums in approval. There’s something addictive about the mix of feeling Jungkook’s skin and breathing in his caramelized scent that fogs Taehyung’s head.

Taehyung’s mind clouds everything around him yet sharpens on Jungkook in contrast. He stretches on the collar of the shirt to loosen it, enough to display the collarbone that he can now properly scent, one of his thumb pressing under.

Taehyung relishes in how obedient Jungkook is to the demands of Taehyung’s hands. He can drag his nose and mouth without any lingering concern of being too much or transferring his scent too strongly on Jungkook, unlike how he had been in the tent. He can also squeeze Jungkook’s petite waist whenever he feels the urge to hold Jungkook better.

“Tilt your head back for me.” Taehyung punctuates the demand with a tug on the hair at the base of Jungkook’s neck. Jungkook complies, giving access to such a vital point so eagerly that Taehyung’s dragon and *himself* both rumble in his breath pouch and the back of his throat. “Good,” he rasps, then finds his home under Jungkook’s chin that he nudges.

“Your eyes are golden again,” Jungkook says, and yeah.

Taehyung had assumed as much.

“It’s just so…” Taehyung’s lips part around a sigh and he blames it on his haziness when his opened mouth rests at the base of Jungkook’s throat, where the scent is the most potent. “You smell so fucking good.”

And it gets better somehow.

The more Taehyung touches Jungkook, the more Taehyung’s scent permeates through Jungkook’s and the thought alone drives Taehyung a little mad.

It also has him realize that he isn’t close enough to Jungkook. So he shuffles higher up the mattress and he tightens his hold around Jungkook’s waist to pull him down on his lap then press their chests flush, and only then does Taehyung feel a lot more satisfied.

Taehyung’s palms skid up Jungkook’s naked back, eliciting a shudder in their rake. When his nails softly catch onto the skin in a soft, long scratch, Jungkook’s spine arches with a hiss, allowing Taehyung to nestle the angle of Jungkook’s jaw. “Would you let someone else scent you?”

“No,” Jungkook answers, so prompt and honest.

“You wouldn’t bare your neck for someone else, right?”

Jungkook hums, his bent leg pressing against Taehyung’s side. “I wouldn’t.”

“Good…"

“You’d be annoyed if I were to?”

“Understatement,” Taehyung replies after a beat, passing his lips over the shoulder where he feels Jungkook’s chuckle shake through.

“Only you can do this.”

“Yeah?” It comes more breathy than intended but Taehyung is drunk on how good he and Jungkook smell together.

There’s a selfish word that flickers in Taehyung’s mind.

Because Jungkook is *Taehyung’s* to touch like this, isn’t h—

Taehyung reneges the thought.

He knows he’s being commandeered by the way his dragon is taking over his mind and gnawing at what semblance of inhibition and rationale he has left. It’s the only thing that makes sense, after all. Yet, in spite of his better judgment, he still speaks out the selfish word.

“Is it mine?” Taehyung whispers atop the pulsating vein on Jungkook’s throat, and he should stop, because he doesn’t even know what he’s saying anymore, but he can’t bring himself to shush his greed.

“I—” Jungkook pauses. “Yes.”

Taehyung braces himself on an arm to study Jungkook. “What is it?”

“Taehyung…” Jungkook covers half of his face in the crook of his elbow as one of his hands grips onto Taehyung’s shirt.

“You were about to say something."

Jungkook shakes his head.

Taehyung tilts his own with a hum, distractedly dragging his inner wrist along Jungkook's waist. “Lying to me?” He huffs a chuckle when Jungkook nods, ever so candid. It seems that Taehyung can’t resist much when it comes to Jungkook, and so he lowers his face near Jungkook’s to graze their cheeks together, his lips bumping on the lobe seconds later, leaving a trail of his scent behind. “What did you want to say?”

“It’s— It’s nothing. M’not thinking straight.”

“Neither am I.”

“Tae…”

“It’s just us. No one else but me can hear you, mh?”

Jungkook exhales a shaky sigh. His hands find their way at the back of Taehyung's head and they apply some pressure there to keep Taehyung's face burrowed on his neck. “You asked if it’s yours…” he starts and trails off for a moment, twirling and pulling on some of the strands. "I am."

Taehyung stills.

He must have misheard or misunderstood Jungkook’s words or both at once. Surely, Jungkook isn’t implying that—

“I was about to say I’m you—”

Taehyung springs up and covers Jungkook’s mouth, then he covers his own to keep at bay the rumble that threatens to spill out. Lightning still crackles out between his fingers when he exhales as his quivering arcane begins to slip.

The dragon in Taehyung positively *melts* and if it were to be its own entity outside of Taehyung’s body, he knows that it’d be rolling around and rumbling in happiness like some kind of stupid dog and it’s so damn pathetic but *Elders*.

Taehyung is inexplicably happy.

And confused.

He’s lost and cannot, for the life of him, understand why his instincts react like this with Jungkook.

“Don’t— Don’t say stuff like that,” Taehyung mutters against his twitching fingers. “You can’t say that shit to me and then—” He removes his hand from Jungkook’s mouth at the latter’s request and he immediately buries his face in Jungkook’s neck again. “Fuck.”

“Your dragon likes it too much?”

“Shut up.”

Taehyung resumes his scenting because he might die if he does not.

What may also kill him are Jungkook’s words that keep replaying in his head in a loop that slowly drains Taehyung’s sanity. He grips onto Jungkook’s waist, perhaps a tad too strong, but Jungkook doesn’t say anything, and Taehyung needs to make sure that Jungkook can’t get away from him.

“I am your husband,” Jungkook says who, akin to Taehyung, must have thrown caution out the window. “It’s your ring on my finger.” And it is, the metal band warm on Taehyung’s nape. “A part of me became yours when we married each other.”

Taehyung’s vision is hazy when he leans back to peer down at Jungkook. “Shut up,” he says even if he wants nothing more than for Jungkook to do the opposite.

“You really like it,” Jungkook unhelpfully observes. “I like wearing your ring too.”

“*Stop.*” Taehyung seizes Jungkook’s left hand to slam it on the pillow. His gaze darts on Jungkook’s face where a playful smile dances on the lips, then it flickers on Jungkook’s hand. On the white gold band and diamond.

It’s Taehyung’s wedding ring.

Jungkook is wearing it.

Because it belongs to Taehyung.

“S’my ring,” Taehyung mumbles, feeling more and more intoxicated by everything that Jungkook makes: his scent, his words, his gaze that does not stray away from Taehyung.

“It is,” Jungkook says with a hummed chuckle. “It’s your ring on me. Your scent on me. Your hands on me too.”

Taehyung has never experienced anything as such before, a moment in life where he has felt so in tune with his draconic impulses, where he allows them to exist and obtain what they want: every piece of Jungkook.

“Do you like it? The idea of me being yours?”

Fuck.

“I think you really do. Me too.”

Taehyung nestles Jungkook’s throat.

“Only you can do this.”

Right.

“You know that, yes?”

Taehyung does.

Because Jungkook’s right, isn’t he?

Only Taehyung is allowed to have Jungkook in such ways. Jungkook is Taehyung’s to touch, scent and hold like this, and Taehyung feels something a little less human quivering in bliss within him. It rasps in a dizzying litany at him that Jungkook is his, that he’s *theirs.*

Taehyung’s teeth ache as they part open on the skin of Jungkook’s throat where his lips close. Taehyung swears that he can sense the grim caramel in his mouth, his and Jungkook's scents dripping from the spot Taehyung is occupying.. He’s so damn close to being able to taste it.

Taehyung needs to.

He’s slowly panting against Jungkook’s throat when his tongue fleetingly grazes there. It isn’t accidental like it had been in the tent. It has an intent here that meets its due when a smoky caramel suffuses his taste buds, and it tastes irrationally good.

So much so that Taehyung’s last *‘What the fuck am I doing’* fizzles out of his mind.

Jungkook intertwines his and Taehyung’s fingers from where they’re tangled on the pillow. He sighs Taehyung’s name, the word breathy. He does not tell Taehyung to stop. He does not push him away either.

It reads like a permission.

Taehyung takes it.

His mouth opens on the dip of Jungkook’s neck and shoulder, his lips dragging across the skin there.

He waits a few seconds. Maybe Jungkook will cease everything now.

When it’s clear that it won’t happen, Taehyung drags the tip of his tongue on Jungkook’s throat, right above the warm pulse point dripping with Jungkook’s scent.

Jungkook still says naught.

Taehyung’s hand finds its way beneath Jungkook’s jaw again, making sure to rub his wrist there while he focuses the remainder of his fuzzy attention on where his lips are.

Taehyung’s tongue touches the roof of his mouth and he hums to himself at the flavor that spreads there. It’s nowhere near enough. Or perhaps Taehyung is growing addicted to Jungkook because it must be the only reason why his tongue flattens at the base of Jungkook’s throat.

Taehyung exhales through his mouth.

It tastes so *heavenly.*

Taehyung's tongue swipes on the skin as his teeth and lips close around the flesh. He suckles a bit on the spot, feeling as though he's drinking the purest form of Jungkook's scent, and his mouth parts seconds later to drift lower.

Taehyung ignores the fingers that grip onto his hair, instead ghosting his tongue in the silky dip of Jungkook's collarbone. The caramel is so pungent, blending with the ozone and embers of Taehyung's own scent. Taehyung laps a second time there, then a third that he trails it with a nibble.

A newfound aspect of Taehyung's greed unfurls and wants to coil around Jungkook; leave its mark on him.

Everyone would know, then.

If he were to parade Jungkook afterwards, there wouldn't be anyone doubting who Jungkook belongs with, Taehyung distractedly thinks, or maybe it is his dragon that does. Perhaps both. Taehyung isn't certain, and it does not matter. All that he cares about is that Jungkook is his right now, that Jungkook smells so good.

Tastes perfect too.

Taehyung wants so much more.

He needs to—

Taehyung straightens up to sit back on his haunches but he's too fast and the world sways around him as he lets go of Jungkook's hand.

Taehyung has a full view of Jungkook below him.

Jungkook is laid on his back, surrounded by a sea of blankets and pillows. His face is flushed and Taehyung had not noticed how Jungkook is a little breathless, his gaze lidded and dazed. His hair is fanned out on the pillow, the hoops of his golden earring glinting under the sunlight casting a band of light on his face.

Jungkook is peering up at Taehyung but his eyes disappear when he conceals his face with his arms.

Ah…

The dragon in Taehyung wants to devour the human.

Taehyung's tongue darts over his lower lip where he can still taste the remnants of caramel. He grips the underside of Jungkook's right thigh with a hand, lifting it a little higher, spreading the legs a little more, enough for him to access the back of Jungkook's knee. He noses at the dip there, sighing to himself.

"Why—" Jungkook gnaws on his swollen lower lip. "Why my knee?"

"Pulse point."

There are other places where Jungkook's scent pulsates out of him, on those where the heat carries his scent through the air and to Taehyung.

Taehyung's free hand drifts above Jungkook’s throat, cupping it fully, and Taehyung could rumble in bliss when Jungkook lets it happen.

When Jungkook’s submission to Taehyung is so *beautiful.*

Taehyung places his mouth at the back of Jungkook’s knee. Jungkook tries to close his legs but Taehyung’s grip tightens and the nail of his thumb lightly sinks on the skin of Jungkook’s throat, both warnings Jungkook listens to.

A shiver runs through Jungkook’s slackening form, lids fluttering.

Of course Jungkook enjoys this.

The same Jungkook who does not hide the way he perks up in awe whenever Taehyung shows a sliver of his power.

When Jungkook peeks through his arms to meet Taehyung’s gaze, Taehyung’s tongue presses behind Jungkook’s knee. He can still taste the caramel even through the fabric of the pants, the place warm. Taehyung’s mouth shuffles lower, more on the underside of the thigh, and Jungkook hides himself in the crook of his elbows again.

Taehyung’s teeth ache.

He doesn’t mean to do so. At least not there. But Taehyung still gnaws once on the spot.

Jungkook’s reaction is immediate.

His breath hitches and his spine arches as his head tosses backward on the pillow. One of his hands flies to his own thigh while his other one grips the wrist of Taehyung’s hand cupping his throat. “Hah… Taehyung… Feels—” Jungkook tries to conceal himself once more.

Taehyung intervenes. He releases his clamp on Jungkook’s leg to grab the forearm draped over Jungkook’s face. Taehyung needs to see everything, whether it be Jungkook’s flush on his cheekbones or the way his teeth come down on his lower lip around a soft sound.

The short sleeve of the shirt Jungkook wears slides down to his shoulder. It displays the inner side of the elbow that Taehyung nuzzles at, drowning himself in Jungkook’s scent while he kneads a thumb on the throbbing vein in Jungkook’s throat.

Soon, Taehyung's lips trail up Jungkook's inner wrist. He obeys his own urge as his tongue joins his lips, flattening there before he allows the tip to trace a path along the veins that color Jungkook’s skin in a blueish purple.

The purple darkens, somehow.

Taehyung watches with muted fascination the way the tattoos crawl up Jungkook’s neck and collarbones, disappearing under the palm Taehyung has slung over Jungkook’s throat. Jungkook’s eyes are black too, seeming unaware of what is happening.

Small flames suddenly flicker out of Taehyung’s mouth. He moves away from him.

Shouldn’t hurt his human.

“Your arcane,” Taehyung lowly says as he watches how some tiny bolts of lightning mingle with the flames where his palms hovers Jungkook's throat.

“Uh?”

Taehyung lifts his hand and subsequently Jungkook’s that is still encasing his wrist.

Jungkook emits a quiet *‘Oh’* when he peers at them. “Sorry, I—”

“No, it’s fine. It’s fine.” Taehyung pins Jungkook’s hand on the pillow while he brings the other one to his face again, uncaring of the flames flickering there that he knows won’t hurt him. “S’fine.”

Taehyung enters some kind of trance as his gaze traces Jungkook's face, where he does not think he’d be able to look away even if the bedroom was in flames around them.

His human is so, *so* pretty.

Pretty eyes.

Pretty tattoos.

Pretty arcane.

Jungkook would prettily wear marks too.

Taehyung is parched for more and so is his tongue that joins the place he has been mouthing at. He suckles on the skin and he exhales when caramel — *so much of it* — floods his mouth. He feels something cold against his cheek, then fingers that cup it, and Jungkook’s flames have some lightning in them that twist and coil over Taehyung’s skin.

Jungkook squirms on his spot, his thighs closing around Taehyung’s hips, and he makes an aborted sound when Taehyung laps at the wrist. Taehyung can’t quite pinpoint what it is that he suddenly tastes, however he eventually manages to put a word on the mellow hint: pomegranate.

The caramel in Jungkook’s scent soon becomes more of a rich and wine-like, with a hint of fruit in it and *fuck.* “Tastes so good,” Taehyung mumbles and when he nips a second time it’s with less restraint than wanted. Jungkook startles. “Sorry.”

“Just surprised me.”

“You don’t mind?” Taehyung wonders and when Jungkook shakes his head, he squeezes Jungkook’s wrist a little stronger. “Yes or no.”

“Yes…”

The wrist, knee or anything else don’t satisfy Taehyung anymore, so he leans forward and finds his home in Jungkook’s neck, a hand cupping Jungkook’s nape.

Taehyung really doesn’t mean to do so, but he leaves an open-mouthed kiss on Jungkook’s throat before his tongue skims a stroke there. “It wants to mark you,” he whispers, a puppet to his impulses.

Jungkook’s hands drift under Taehyung’s shirt to sprawl on the scars marring the shoulders. The pain is abated, absorbed by Jungkook’s touches. “Does your dragon want to make me his?”

Oh.

It does.

Taehyung also wan—

“You can.”

Ah… Of course Taehyung’s human would allow it.

He belongs to Taehyung, after all.

The human is so good.

For Taehyung. For his dragon. For *them* because it feels as though Taehyung’s dragon has become its own entity whose devotion is wholeheartedly given to Jungkook.

Taehyung feels dizzy and sleepy and so blissfully lavish at every pass of lips and tongue across Jungkook's skin he drinks the scent of.

The ache in his teeth relents when he finally bites down at the juncture of Jungkook’s neck. Not as hard as he wants to. He shouldn’t break the skin. But it’ll be enough to leave the imprint of his teeth.

It must hurt a bit because Jungkook’s spine curls inward beneath Taehyung’s palm. A sound is trapped in Jungkook’s throat, something between a whine and sigh, and nails sink into Taehyung’s shoulders. Taehyung hums when they carelessly scrape down his scars, pleased by how Jungkook seems lost in his own mind.

Taehyung parts away seconds later. A sheen of saliva on Jungkook’s throat greets Taehyung, surrounded by teeth marks, and Taehyung both wipes and soothes it with a drag of his mouth. He’s too greedy, however, because he ends up closing his lips there and suckling on the spot.

“It feels good,” Jungkook hums, one of his legs hiking up Taehyung’s side.

“Yeah?” Taehyung breathes out.

“One more.”

Taehyung tilts his head to focus on the other side of Jungkook’s neck. At first he only lets the tip of his tongue trail along the column of Jungkook’s throat, but his dragon grumbles for more, and Taehyung caves in. The taste of pomegranate spreads when Taehyung flattens his tongue. It’s sweet, with a hint of something acidic that is lessened by the caramel that submerges everything.

Taehyung halts under the angle of the jaw near the lobe where his teeth come down and when Jungkook presses at the back of Taehyung’s head in encouragement, Taehyung bites a little longer. A little harder. This spot is sensitive. Taehyung knows this. And so he chuckles to himself when a shudder runs down Jungkook’s back that pebbles with goosebumps.

Jungkook is so responsive to anything he allows Taehyung to do, turned into a mollified, trembling mess, throat barren and exposed for Taehyung. He sighs at a brush or knead, he hisses at a bite, he emits soft sounds here and there in-between two drags of Taehyung's tongue.

So many new songs Taehyung is learning today.

"Driving me insane…" Taehyung's hands won't stop caressing up and down on Jungkook's sides and spine, pausing to cup the waist only to trail back up with his nails.

"Tae—"

"Why does your scent taste so good," Taehyung mumbles on Jungkook's throat. "Smells s'good…" He has half a mind to completely remove the rode up shirt, but that'd mean Taehyung's scent would cover Jungkook less, and Taehyung doesn't want that.

"What do I smell like?"

"Pomegranate. So rich… 'can taste it," Taehyung says and does as much when he laps at the base of Jungkook's throat.

"That's… That's new." Jungkook clears his throat as he tries to shuffle on the bed but Taehyung pins him down on his spot. "Wh—What else do I smell like?"

"Mine," Taehyung whispers, both to please his dragon but also himself, even if he's not certain that the answer makes any sense, his mind and thoughts clouded. "Smell like mine… 'Cause you are, mh? Said no one else can touch you like this."

"I am, Tae."

"S'right," Taehyung hums, delirious.

A continuous rumble quivers in his breath pouch.

Taehyung's tongue finds its home on the pulsating vein at the dip of Jungkook's neck where his mouth rests. Taehyung briefly bites down once more. Jungkook isn't close enough, all of a sudden. It prompts Taehyung to cradle Jungkook's nape to press closer if possible. His hand ghosts from the spine to the upper thigh to spread the legs further apart and pull Jungkook higher up on Taehyung's lap.

Everyone will know; whose Jungkook is now.

They'll know Taehyung scented Jungkook. They'll smell Taehyung and his dragon on him. They'll see the marks Taehyung has left on him.

Taehyung's mouth grows bolder if possible, ghosting the neck, flicking at the back of the ear before trailing down the throat in a long, slow stroke of the flat of his tongue and lips. He sucks another mark there because for every new one he makes, the urge to make ten more swells.

"Taehyung." Jungkook's nails catch on Taehyung's skin. "Tae, I need—" An aborted keen tumbles from his mouth at another nibble. "Fuck… Taehyung, please."

'Taehyung'. 'Taehyung'. 'Taehyung'.

Jungkook won't stop whispering, breathing out, *whining* Taehyung's name, as though it is the only word his mind can bring forth, and the rumble deepens within Taehyung at the idea of overtaking Jungkook's thoughts like Jungkook is with Taehyung's.

"Tae… Hah, that's—" Jungkook's hands slide on Taehyung's chest, still under the shirt that rides up at the motion when Taehyung nips at a collarbone. "Taehyung, wait. Can you— I need a moment."

Taehyung immediately sits up. He doesn't hold Jungkook back when the latter scoots higher up the mattress and away from Taehyung.

Still laid down, respiration rapid Jungkook draws his legs up to cross his ankles together and he drapes an arm over his face, the other limply resting next to his head.

The apology is heavy on Taehyung's tongue and he's about to utter it when Jungkook speaks.

"Fuck. *Fuck.* Never mind, never mind, come back," he rushes to say and his legs part open to grips Taehyung's shirt and yank him closer.

Taehyung's hands tentatively settle on Jungkook's waist once more as he settles between Jungkook's thighs. "S'ry."

"It's fine," Jungkook says and covers his mouth with trembling fingers. "Just… Slow down a bit?"

Taehyung nods, even if he doesn't really understand why nor what he's supposed to slow down. However he buries his face in Jungkook's neck to scent this area. His mouth opens but it's only to close around the skin in a feather-light kiss. "Good?"

"Yes, s'good like this. I… I like it, I really do. It's just a lot and—" Jungkook shakily sighs, melting in Taehyung's arms. "It feels so good, Tae. You're scenting me so well."

Taehyung's arms curl around Jungkook's waist and he respects the light distance Jungkook has put between them, not quite pressing himself flush above Jungkook. "I'm supposed to slow down," he mumbles. "Don't say that."

Jungkook breathlessly chuckles. "Sorry."

"Felt good?" Taehyung wonders, concern flashing in him.

"It felt really good. Still does. Maybe—" Jungkook clears his throat. "Maybe it felt a little too good? So I— I need to breathe for a moment. I wasn't expecting you to be so… So intense."

Taehyung doesn't think he's been intense. Jungkook just tastes good. "It's your scent. Smells and tastes divine, could drink more," Taehyung mouths on the curve of Jungkook's throat.

"You will. I promise."

"You're okay?"

"I'm more than okay."

Jungkook is feeling good, and Taehyung's happiness coalesces with the yearn to keep the human comfortable and safe.

Taehyung deeply breathes in and out through his nose, both to bask in Jungkook's scent whose pomegranate aspect is diminishing, but also to anchor himself on something no matter how futile it is. Taehyung is too far gone in his own mind, barely able to grasp anything other than Jungkook.

Jungkook combs through Taehyung's hair with a hand, each motion intersected by pleasant scratches on Taehyung's scalp, while his other hand slips under the shirt to caress the two elongated scars. It tempers the dragon in Taehyung yet heightens the bliss they both feel.

Taehyung doesn't know why but he thinks about The Thing he got for Jungkook.

Maybe it's because he wants Jungkook to wear more stuff Taehyung has chosen for him.

Taehyung should give it to Jungkook. He should get him more things. A lot. Jungkook likes jewelry. Taehyung will get some for him. Maybe more paint too. And the chocolate chips and dried fruits Jungkook likes to snack on. Taehyung also found a pretty feather. It could be a new quill for Jungkook.

They could go back to the cave as well. Just them and no one else.

They can do so many things together. Jungkook is here again, in Taehyung's arms, safe and sound, and he smells so… perfect. An absolute blend of his own and Taehyung's scents.

And Jungkook is Taehyung's, the dragon in him unhelpfully supplies.

"I'll take you somewhere high up," Taehyung says after a while where he brushes his nose on Jungkook's collarbones.

"Will you take me to other places?"

"Wherever you want to go."

"Wherever?" Jungkook echoes and Taehyung hums. "I'd love that."

Taehyung feels full. *Satiated.* Like he has consumed the most heavenly fare. "Just…" Taehyung is sleepy, a pleasant somnolence wrapping around him. "Stay close to me for a bit."

"I will for a long while."

"A'ight."

The rumbles in Taehyung's breath pouch rise once more when Jungkook traces haphazard patterns on Taehyung's scars, or when Jungkook grazes his inner wrist on Taehyung's nape. Jungkook is human, yet he still scents Taehyung, and Taehyung couldn't be any happier. He even encourages Jungkook to continue by nuzzling him when Jungkook stops.

Taehyung thinks he randomly dozes off at some point because when he comes to himself again, he's still laid between Jungkook's legs and on top of him, however his legs are stretched, one of his hands cupping Jungkook's nape.

He's probably smothering Jungkook.

Taehyung likes it.

“Are you falling asleep?”

“I scented you well,” Taehyung mutters, his cheek squished on Jungkook’s shoulder.

“Yes.” Jungkook huffs a chuckle that Taehyung feels against his chest. “You did a good job.”

Taehyung really did. His human smells like a heaven Taehyung would die for if it meant accessing it. If he could, he’d pat his own back for his impressive work. “You liked it?”

“Yes. I loved it.”

Taehyung really wishes he could pat his own back.

He contents himself by uttering a *‘Good’* that is intersected by a yawn. He’s exhausted all of a sudden, as if he’s coming down from his high. It doesn’t help that Jungkook keeps carding through Taehyung’s strands or caressing Taehyung’s back, lulling him to a slumber.

“Sleep well, Tae.”

Taehyung mumbles a response, falling asleep to something that presses atop his head.

The ceiling is the same yet it’s different. The world seems taller as well.

Weird.

Taehyung frowns, laid down on his back with the remnants of sleep clouding his mind. He peers to his right. The bed frame is empty, for some reasons.

That’s *weird.*

Taehyung rises on his elbows. He surveys the mess of blankets, pillows, geodes and gems surrounding him.

That’s really fucking weird.

He eventually realizes that the mattress is on the ground.

He catches some movements in his peripheral vision.

Jungkook is reclined against the wall, clearly engrossed in the book about sound and arcane Taehyung had written because he has this small frown etching his brows. Taehyung stares, his questions about why the mattress is on the ground dissipating.

Jungkook looks beautiful.

His hair is tousled and his lips are pink and a bit puffy, as if bitten on too much. He’s also wearing the shirt Taehyung had given to him.

What strikes Taehyung to a complete stillness is a smell.

Jungkook's scent is *saturated* with Taehyung's, so much so that it has created a new fragrance of smoky caramel and rainy graveyard. It should be an odd, off putting combination, yet it coalesces so deliciously that Taehyung can't help but crave more if the pull he feels in his eyes is any indication.

Taehyung's gaze darts on Jungkook's neck.

Not a single blink tears through his stupor.

There's a bruise there. Several, actually. They're all somewhat round and purple, framed by a reddish, circular series of dashes. They almost look like the mark of tee—

Taehyung's eyes widen, abruptly awakened.

Memories of Jungkook being laid under him, of Jungkook's scent suffusing his senses flash before his eyes. They're trailed by those of his mouth opening, of a sigh and of his tongue—

Jungkook slams the book shut, startling Taehyung. "You're freaking out."

Taehyung sits up like a rod.

"Don't freak out."

"Holy fucking shit."

"I liked it."

"Holy *shit.*"

"Loved it, actually. Every bit of it. From beginning to end. So you've got nothing to be freaking out about."

"Stop saying that I'm freaking out."

"Then stop freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out. You're freaking out," Taehyung childishly retorts. "Fuck. Fucking hell." He hunches over himself, elbows on his knees to card his hands through his hair. "I'm not freaking out." He makes the mistake of glancing over his shoulder at Jungkook. He notices the other marks coloring — *adorning* — Jungkook's wrist and also another one on the right collarbone.

"Uhm… About that."

"Am I some kind of fucking animal?"

"I mean…" Jungkook's lips twitch. "You're partly a reptile."

"Shut the hell up."

Jungkook snorts.

Taehyung rapidly blinks as he surveys Jungkook's marks. "Elders."

“Yeah, it’s a little visible, but—”

“A *little?* I mauled you!” Taehyung squeaks. “What is wrong with me. What the fuck is wrong with me? I did not do all of this. That wasn’t me.”

“Taehyu—”

“No. *No.* Wasn’t me. That was my dragon.”

“But your dragon is you and—”

“No. Not anymore. That was before…” Taehyung wildly gestures at Jungkook. “This. I’ve disowned it. It’s its own thing from now on and it is *not* me. You hear me?” He catches Jungkook’s not so discreet eye roll. “By the Elders. I *licked* you. I sucked your neck.”

Jungkook pulls the collar of his shirt to conceal his face. “You don’t have to say it out loud.”

“My tongue was on your neck.”

“Stop saying it out loud!”

“Why was it on your neck and wrist?! On your *throat?!"*

“I don’t know!”

“You were there!”

“You’re the one who did all of this to me!”

“I did. Oh my God.”

“You swore to my God,” Jungkook gasps. “By the Elders.”

“Because swearing to the Elders isn’t enough for what I’ve done. I’ve gone mental. I *actually* forever lost my mind when you disappeared. I should have killed Yumi,” Taehyung blurts out. “Maybe that would have helped and I wouldn’t have licked you.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

“It’s not funny.”

“You’re right. It’s hilarious.”

“Shut. Up.”

“Nothing wrong happened, Taehyung. We’re two consenting adults.”

“My tongue was on you like a deranged animal and I mean dragonborns can do that sometimes when they groom each other but it usually only happens while in dragon form. I think. I don’t know. I licked you. Why did you taste good? I mean it. *It.* Why did *it* taste good.”

Taehyung’s gaze drifts on Jungkook’s throat.

Taehyung's lips part and he presses his thumb on his tongue when he recalls the taste of caramel and pomegranate.

"You want to do it again."

Taehyung's eyes meet Jungkook's. "How would you know," he challenges, full accusation.

"Golden eyes."

Taehyung tries to chase it but from the smug look on Jungkook's face, he doesn't succeed very well.

Something rattles at the foot of the bed when Jungkook moves.

Taehyung looks and sees the bottle of water along with the empty cup. "Did you leave the hoard?"

"Yes. To grab my cup and some water."

Taehyung scowls. "Why did you leave it."

"To… grab my cup and some water?"

"You could have woken me up so that I could do it," Taehyung mutters. He sniffs in Jungkook's direction. "You reek of me." Taehyung isn't the kind of guy to giggle, but he kinda wants to giggle because Jungkook *really* reeks of him and oh if only Woobin was here to—

"Isn't that what you want?"

It is.

Taehyung swiftly nuzzles Jungkook's neck once before springing to his feet. Jungkook makes a move to stand as well but Taehyung stops him. "No. Can you—"

"Hm?" Jungkook folds his legs under him, sitting on his knees and peering up at Taehyung with a tilt of his head.

That hellish, forsaken word starting with a 'C' races through Taehyung's thoughts.

Taehyung clears his throat. "Can you stay here? If you don't mind?"

"Of course." Jungkook makes himself comfortable in the hoard again, and Taehyung internally sighs in relief. "Get me some snacks, if so? I'm hungry."

"Yeah, I'll be right back," Taehyung says and exits the bedroom.

He freezes at the bottom of the stairs as he peers outside through the bay windows.

He climbs back up.

"It's *midnight,"* Taehyung announces.

"I know."

"How long did I sleep?"

“A long time. I didn’t want to wake you up since you haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

The exhaustion *has* been weighing Taehyung even more since the destruction of the veil on Yumi’s island. “Did you check up on Revna?”

Jungkook nods with a smile. “She woke up to eat and she cried for a bit so I cuddled with her. Then when she felt better she nagged at me for a good hour or so. She seems in good health.”

“That’s good.” The tension in Taehyung relaxes. “Let’s… Let’s talk about everything tomorrow, yes?”

“Yes.”

Taehyung wordlessly walks back down to make a quick snack for himself and Jungkook.

Amidst two thoughts about how nicely his shirt was fitting around Jungkook, Taehyung thinks back of The Thing that is technically several things but Taehyung would rather not ponder on why he's bought more than one thing.

He recalls the regret that had been eating at him while Jungkook had been gone.

It’s with a certain nervousness that Taehyung enters the bedroom and closes the door.

“Thank youuu,” Jungkook says and grabs the bowl Taehyung hands him.

Taehyung leaves his own on the dresser withholding The Thing. He pulls the drawer open. He slides it shut moments later. He goes through this same cycle for a while, torn between giving to Jungkook The Thing or tossing them out the window and never thinking of them ever again.

“Taehyung?”

“I have something to give you,” Taehyung blurts out before he can cower.

“Give me?”

“Yes. Come here.”

“Is it fine if I leave the hoard?”

Taehyung glances at Jungkook. An unexpected fondness unfurls in him. “You can. Thank you for asking,” he says and it's worth it when Jungkook smiles.

From that point onward, and even when Jungkook halts in front of the dresser, Taehyung dutifully avoids Jungkook’s gaze.

“It’s— Uh. I got The Thing when I was out to buy paint a while ago. And spices. So I had the Kaiya trip in mind that may be dangerous.”

“I think we have enough spices to last us for ten years,” Jungkook remarks.

“Probably. Anyway. It was because of the sun.”

“What?”

“The sun reflected on them. On the buckles. And The Thing is in several parts so it’s technically several things but one of The Thing’s things had me thinking *‘Oh, this reminds me of Jungkook’* and I didn’t want to buy it, initially, because it’s stupid, but I ended up getting it anyway and then— Then I… I got awkward ‘cause I don’t— I mean. I give gifts to people. Sometimes. But it’s never that kind of stuff so I—” Taehyung closes his eyes as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “What the fuck am I saying.”

“Taehyung,” Jungkook chuckles and rests a hand on Taehyung’s shoulder. “I’m sure I’ll love it. Them? Whatever it is that you got for me.”

“I’m not worried about whether or not you like it.”

“Are you really not?”

Taehyung can nearly hear the brow Jungkook arches. “I also made something. When you were gone.”

“May I see everything?”

Taehyung curtly nods. “I should’ve given them to you earlier. It’s stupid, but…” He glances at Jungkook. “When you were gone, I couldn’t stop thinking about these and how I may never get the chance to give them to you if you were— If something bad had happened to you.”

“But I’m here.” Jungkook hooks his arm with Taehyung’s. “So you can show me.”

“Yeah.” Taehyung clears his throat. “Can you face that wall and not look at the bed frame?” He asks and points away from the dresser.

Jungkook swivels around and he sways back and forth on the ball of his feet, humming to himself.

After some self encouragement and a *‘Why are you worried about this, it’s literally nothing and who cares if Jungkook doesn’t like them’,* Taehyung pulls open the drawer. He pushes his underwear aside and plucks out the two paper bags. He rummages through them, taking out The Thing Plural.

Taehyung neatly arranges The Thing N°1 specifically handpicked for the trip to the Kaiya, then he places next to it The Thing N°2 and N°3 that he’s still not quite certain of what they are. But what he knows is that N°2 *is* Jungkook’s style and this is all that matters.

Taehyung studies his purchases, arms limp by his sides.

What has he done? What was he *thinking?* Why—

“Don’t freak out.”

Taehyung wants to both freak out and pout.

“Can I see? Taehyung?”

Taehyung rubs a hand on his forehead. He heaves a deep sigh. He walks up to Jungkook and after one last moment of hesitation, he grabs Jungkook by the elbow and pulls him toward the bed frame where The Thing Plural are laid on the wooden slats.

Jungkook stares at the display.

His face is unreadable, which is unnerving enough for Taehyung to fidget on his spot before he walks to the dresser that he leans against.

Jungkook still does not say anything.

“I’ll give them back if you don’t like them or find them weird,” Taehyung starts and crosses his arms over his chest. “It’s your style? I think? Not necessarily what I got for Kaiya, but the rest does look like what you can wear and I think it’s a set? The top with the belt thingy. But the jacket is in a sturdy material that can cushion hits, resist cuts and is also resistant to different breaths. It’ll be good for the trip since we don’t know what may happen in that forest, and I noticed you don’t have any kind of armor and…” Taehyung quietens when Jungkook turns around to reduce the distance between them.

Jungkook halts in front of Taehyung. His fingers hover between them, his fists clenching then relaxing. The hands eventually sprawl on Taehyung’s chest, sliding up the collarbones to curl at the back of Taehyung’s neck. Jungkook looks a little less impassive but still hard to read.

Jungkook’s head moves forward and Taehyung can tell from the look in Jungkook’s eyes that it’s a bit of an experiment when Jungkook presses a kiss not on the corner of Taehyung's mouth, but quiet near it.

“Thank you,” Jungkook murmurs then nuzzles Taehyung’s cheek before leaning back. “Was this okay?”

Was it?

“Do it again."

Jungkook happily does, pressing another kiss on the same spot but it’s a little farther away from the corner of Taehyung’s mouth, and Taehyung wonders if Jungkook is getting shy.

“Is it?”

It’s not too bad. Jungkook’s lips are soft and they tend to have this nice strawberry scent to them.

Taehyung shrugs.

“Do you like it?”

“Don’t push it,” Taehyung scoffs.

Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip but it does nothing to hide his smile.

Without another word, he skips back to the bed frame to lift the protective jacket. It’s black and tight fitting, complemented by some buckles here and there, shoulder pads and a criss-crossing pattern at the back. It also has a belt at the waist along with some pockets and a sheath for the dagger Jungkook owns.

“This is so pretty,” Jungkook says with reverence, his thumb brushing on the fabric. “I rarely wear black.”

“Why?”

“Well… I thought it might be too on the nose considering the arcane I have.”

“I think a necromancer dressed in all black with the black flames swirling around him is neat,” Taehyung counters and Jungkook chuckles. “You should just wear what you want.”

Jungkook grins. “I will.” He places the jacket back to where it'd been to take what Taehyung had assumed to be a harness. “What is that?”

Taehyung frowns. “I thought you would know.”

“You don’t even know what you bought?”

“It was shiny with gold and silver. It reminded me of you. I bought it,” Taehyung declares. “I think it’s a harness? And a corset?” He adds and nods toward the third garment.

Jungkook fiddles with The Thing N°3, shifting a belt this and that way. Then he gasps. “Oh my God?”

“What?”

“Taehyung, you—” Jungkook’s head twists around and the rosy tint that slowly colors his cheeks isn’t lost on Taehyung. “This isn’t a harness.”

“Then what is it?”

Jungkook inspects The Thing N°3 along with N°2 that he lays beneath N°3. His head tilts to the side. He grabs the corset. He stares at it. He throws it on the slats seconds later. “Oh my God!”

“What?!” Taehyung snaps, both confused and nervous.

“What did you get me?!”

“I don’t know?! It’s just a harness! Why are you yelling?” Taehyung *yells*.

“It’s for the legs!”

“It’s a corset!”

“Yes! But—”

“*What?*”

“Taehyung.” Jungkook squats and slumps on the bed frame. “You bought me a set of lingerie.”

“What?”

Taehyung did what?

“What?” Taehyung reiterates and does so a third time because, really, *what?*

“*You.* Bought me. Lingerie.”

“No.”

“This is lingerie.”

“No it’s not.”

Jungkook springs up and marches toward Taehyung. He yanks him to the bed frame and points an accusing finger at Thing N°2. “This corset is a lingerie corset. And this,” he carries on and now points at N°3, “is the garter that goes with it. This isn’t a harness. This goes around the waist and the two parts at the bottom are attached around the thighs and then you’re supposed to add s— stockings,” he stutters and lets go of Taehyung’s wrist to cover his face with his hands. He blushes. “There’s even the... The panties.”

Taehyung is the one to blush now. “Don’t fucking say that word. I did not buy lingerie. I would know.”

“You clearly would not.”

“Shut up.” Taehyung thinks back on the retailer’s face then and how surprised the man had seemed.

"How did you even think this was for the shoulders when there's a panty with it..."

"I thought... I thought it was a decoration for the chest..."

"You're actually so stupid."

"Quiet."

“This is lingerie, Taehyung, and *I* would know because I bought a few similar things in the past and they’re corsets like these but they definitely were in the lingerie section. And while I do enjoy wearing some of these as an everyday outfit, they’re still lingerie in the first place but I just don’t care because I know how to coordinate them nicely a-and— Oh my God.” Jungkook deeply inhales and exhales. “You bought me lingerie.” He crouches again, crossing his arms on the wooden slat to bury his head there.

So Taehyung is having a bit of a crisis on this fine night.

He turns around. He braces himself on the wall, another hand on his hip as he blankly stares at the ground.

He licked Jungkook and accidentally bought him a set of lingerie.

Jungkook barely came back yesterday — or the day before? Taehyung has lost track of time —, yet all of this has already gone down.

Perhaps Taehyung has really died from heartbreak and has now been lost into some kind of twisted, fucked up limbo.

“I love it,” Jungkook says. “All of it.”

“Don’t speak a word about this to anyone. Especially not Jimin.”

Jungkook snickers. “Sure.”

Taehyung rubs a palm on his face. “I’ll just… Let’s mutually pretend that I never bought this,” he says and ignores the following laughter that erupts behind him to make his way to the dresser. He peers at the small, wooden bow tucked in the corner of the drawer. “There’s another thing.”

“More lingerie?”

“If you utter that forsaken word one more time…” Taehyung twists just in time to see Jungkook’s shaking shoulders. “And no. It’s the thing I made. One night, I really couldn’t sleep at all and there was nothing I could do. I had to wait around for some news. So I, uh, I made something. S’nothing fancy,” he adds when Jungkook pauses next to him.

“Say, Tae.” Jungkook’s gaze finds Taehyung’s. “Do you like spoiling me?”

Taehyung blinks, which is quite the feat when he’s barely capable of processing the question. “Why are you asking?”

“Because you got me three different things. Four if we count the set as two.”

“I mean— That’s not spoiling. And the thing I made isn’t a gift. I was just angsty and needed to do something.”

“If you say so,” Jungkook teases. “Can I have it?”

Taehyung promptly hands the box to Jungkook. He’s apprehensive, even more than for The Thing Plural, because what he has carved may have been too on the nose contrary to Jungkook wearing black.

Jungkook pulls on the box’s lid to open it. “Oh.” He peers down at the content. His brows furrows and lips pinch together. “Oh... Taehyung…” His gaze flutters from the box to Taehyung then back on the box.

“It’s nothing crazy,” Taehyung mumbles and he watches how Jungkook carefully removes the pair of earrings from their crate. Each one is wooden and shaped in some kind of tiny, bones-like armature. They look a bit like a miniature bony hand holding a white pearl. “Is that too much… You’re a necromancer, but…”

“No it’s— It’s perfect. They’re beautiful.” Jungkook’s lips tremble a bit and there’s a shine in his eyes that he blinks away. “You know,” he rasps, his voice stifled, “I don’t think you realize how much it means to me, that you’re so accepting of my necromancy. Not only do you not mind it, but you also… You show it care and appreciation.” Jungkook clutches the earring and buries his face in the crook of his elbow. “It makes me really happy. Thank you.”

Taehyung ruffles Jungkook’s hair but it turns more into brushes of the strands. “You’re welcome.”

Jungkook nods, using the collar of his shirt to wipe his eyes.

“I like your necromancy. I think it’s fascinating.”

“Do you find it pretty?”

Taehyung thinks back on how Jungkook had looked when he had scented him. “I do.”

Jungkook makes a sound, this soft half hum, half chuckle that he tends to make, and Taehyung already knows a peck will be laid on his cheek before it happens. “Thank you,” Jungkook says against Taehyung’s cheekbone. “I love them. Everything,” he adds with a teasing smile.

“I didn’t realize what I was buying so let’s not talk about this ever again.”

Jungkook places the earrings back in the box that he closes.

“You’re not gonna wear them now?” Taehyung asks.

Jungkook shakes his head then silently surveys Taehyung. Seconds later, he gathers all the gifts and walks out of the bedroom to enter his own bedroom that clicks shut.

Taehyung is confused, but Jungkook looks happy, and he counts this as a victory in his book.

It is all that matters, after all: Jungkook being happy and here with Taehyung.

Taehyung and Jungkook spend a — too short — total of three days together on their own — and with Revna.

They don’t mention anything regarding Yumi, the abduction, or Revna, in a mutual accord, preferring to enjoy their peace and company for a moment.

So life is *good*.

Taehyung does not wash Jungkook again, however he does end up spreading moisturizing lotion on Jungkook’s face after Jungkook has done the same to Taehyung. Taehyung had grumbled and denied the demand at first, but he had eventually caved in, which he had entirely blamed his dragon for.

Taehyung doesn’t know if this is a new ritual that installs between them, where every night before bed, Taehyung helps Jungkook with his skin care routine while the latter tries to coax Taehyung into doing the same.

He likes it nonetheless.

Taehyung scents Jungkook again the night of the third day together leading to the fourth.

Tonight, Jungkook wakes up with a whine, his erratic pants tearing through the silence. He’s gripping onto Taehyung’s arm with a hand, the other clench around the blanket. Fear is washing over Jungkook’s face and Taehyung cradles it to wipe off the sweat.

“I was falling,” Jungkook croaks out.

“It’s alright. I caught you, hm? You’re safe. You’re with me.”

Taehyung anchors Jungkook on the present.

He settles Jungkook between his legs and on top of him, Jungkook's head resting on his chest. Jungkook's respiration is still uneven and rapid.

An idea pops in Taehyung's mind.

Taehyung lets his breaths mingle together, and it doesn't take long for their peaceful rumble to echo in the room.

It has the desired effect, to Taehyung's relief.

Jungkook relaxes above him, his body growing heavier and limbs slackening. Jungkook's breath abates as the minutes trickle by. When Taehyung brushes the bang away from Jungkook's forehead, he can see the way Jungkook's lids are closed shut, his chest slowly heaving up and down now that he has fallen asleep again.

Taehyung continues to comb through Jungkook's hair, his thumb passing by the cheekbone every now and then.

When Jungkook wakes up to a nightmare once more, this time Taehyung presses a kiss of healing on Jungkook's temple, even if Taehyung can't heal others.

Taehyung doesn't want to leave, but it's not like he and Jungkook can live recluse in their house for the rest of their lives.

They could, but it wouldn't be befitting for a prince and a leader.

The two of them ultimately travel to Taehyung's childhood house the next day after they have both agreed to not let anyone in their house for the time being.

Taehyung had been surprised that Jungkook had been the one to mention this, and when Taehyung had asked why, Jungkook had said *'Because when we step inside our house, I want it to be just you, me and Revna for now. No one else. And I know you want the same too.'*

Taehyung had obviously not protested and had instead tried to wipe the stupid smile off his face.

So now Taehyung feels fantastic.

He'd even have a spring to his steps if he wasn't busy loitering in the kitchen of his parents' house. Perhaps his good mood is aided by the fact that he has been adopting an undefeatable approach to the Scenting Clusterfuck: delusional dismissal.

One cannot be freaking out over something that has never happened, after all.

It works wonderfully, and it saves Taehyung from sleepless nights.

He's also happy because Revna is back to her energetic self, curled around Jungkook's shoulders while the ruby is fastened on Taehyung's neck.

Taehyung is in the kitchen, watching Jungkook laugh with Jimin, his bunny teeth peeking out. Taehyung can smell himself on Jungkook, their scent a perfect blend of each other, so there's no doubt that every other dragonborn in the room can as well.

"My son," Dahee says and pats his back. "It is good to see you happy."

Taehyung peers at his mother. "Yeah."

"You scented him again."

Taehyung can't help but be pleased that it *is* indeed noticeable. "My…" He trails off. "My dragon reacted a bit…wildly."

"That is nothing unnatural. Quite the opposite."

"It never has before."

"Because you never allowed it to be free. You have always kept your chaos heritage leashed. I'm glad to see that Jungkook can set it and yourself free."

Taehyung surveys Jungkook again. "I hope I can bring him some freedom too."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about this," Dahee chuckles.

"What does that even mean?"

"Nothing, foolish son."

"You're mean, Mother," Taehyung mutters.

"Yes. Now," Dahee starts and loops her arm around Taehyung's, "tell me what it is that you mean by 'wildly'? Your mother is curious."

A heat crawls up Taehyung's neck. "I'm never telling you."

"Son."

"No."

"You being so adamant about not telling me only makes me more curious."

"'Wildly' was an exaggeration. Forget it."

"Have you claimed Jungkook?"

"No?" Taehyung exclaims. He subdues when several pairs of eyes dart on him. "No," he snips and glares at his mother.

Taehyung did *not* claim Jungkook.

He stares at Jungkook's neck that he knows to be covered — *not adorned* — in peppered bruises, all hidden under a layer of makeup.

His fingers drums on his glass.

“What does claiming entail?” Taehyung asks in spite of his better judgment.

“Markings, among a plethora of other things like sharing clothes.”

“That’s—” Taehyung scoffs. “You’re lying.”

“I’ve claimed your father plenty of ways,” Dahee says and Taehyung makes a gagging noise. “One of them is through bite marks, something that I believe Jungkook is hiding under the makeup he has dabbed on his throat.”

Taehyung’s head darts toward his mother. “How—” His mouth clamps shut. “That isn’t necessarily claiming. I have no care for such things.”

Dahee arches a brow and aims a knowing gaze at Taehyung. “You cannot teach the old dragon how to breathe fire.”

“I scented him. That’s all.”

“Scenting does not involve mauling your betrothed’s neck. Claiming, however? Yes.”

Taehyung yanks his arm away from his mother’s grasp. “Can you stop?”

“My son, I have been young, once.”

“This is my dragon’s fault,” Taehyung hisses. “It was fucking insane and I mean *completely* unhinged. Made me feel all— All intoxicated and high. Absolute nonsense. I still didn’t claim him because I’m not the one who did all of this. So.”

“Who has done it, then?”

“Not me.”

“If it wasn’t you, could it have been Woobin?”

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “I wasn’t Woobin. It was *me* .”

‘Woobin’.

Taehyung shakes his head. The sole sound of this name pisses him off. Good thing the rat hadn’t been there during the searches on the island because Taehyung would have purposefully singed his sorry ass.

“But you just said it wasn’t you.”

“Stop tricking me. This is unbecoming of you.”

Dahee snickers. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Son.”

“Can the others tell that Jungkook has his neck covered?”

“Most probably can’t, no. Jimin definitely does.”

“Fuck.” That explains the mocking look Jimin had thrown in Taehyung’s direction when he had entered the house. Taehyung will have to avoid being alone with Jimin until further notice.

“Did Jungkook enjoy it?”

“Enjoy what?”

“The scenting.”

Taehyung nods, growing a little coy. “Yeah he— He told me he liked it.”

“Good. I’m happy to see that he’s indulging your dragon and impulses. You should do the same with his own.”

“I am.” Taehyung fiddles with his glass. “I want to commission Jimin, actually. Jungkook mentioned wanting to collect bones and things like this, but he’ll need glass cases and metal armatures for that.”

“Collecting bones? Do human hoards?”

“Kinda? I don’t think it’s hoarding in the same sense as us, but Jungkook told me humans collect stuff.”

“Collecting bones is quite a peculiar hobby.”

Taehyung shrugs. “It’s Jungkook.”

“It is indeed,” Dahee smiles but it lowers briefly after.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was afraid of you when you expunged the island.”

Taehyung surveys his mother, a little confused at the veer in the conversation.

“Your arcane is mighty, to an extent neither you, me, or anyone else will ever be able to fathom,” Dahee says, her gaze distant. “You are unique, Taehyung, and I have always been afraid of the distance this singularity would create between you and the rest of the world.”

“Mom…”

“It has been lonely for you. I have seen it in the difficulties you've always had to make friends, in how most dragonborns were terrified of you at first, even those that would become your people. I have also seen it in how your soul has never been able to hold anyone close to it." Dahee peers at Taehyung. "You are no God, however you are unknowingly treated as such by some: admired and revered, yet feared and hated over something you were simply born with. Your arcane is a blessing as much as it has been a curse.”

Taehyung doesn’t bother denying anything.

“The fear I felt of you was primal at first, however it became something sorrowful at the island upon witnessing how lonely your chaos has always been. How *you* have been. But then…" Dahee's gaze drifts toward the living room. "Then I felt boundless relief when Jungkook's own chaos intertwined with yours, when his arcane stormed within yours." A smile tugs at the corner of Dahee’s lips. “It was a beautiful creature coming to life.”

Dahee curls a hand around Taehyung's arm. Taehyung cradles the back of it, his eyes stinging.

"Your chaos isn't lonely anymore, and neither is Jungkook's. I'm happy, Son." Dahee cups Taehyung's face. "And so, so proud of you, of how much of a remarkable leader you will become, and of how far you've come since you first sneezed fire," she teases and Taehyung emits a wet chuckle as she wipes the corner of his eyes. "You deserve to be cared for, and to never know loneliness ever again. So does Jungkook."

Taehyung nods and doesn't say anything, his throat too clogged up to come up with any response. Instead he hugs his mother, the latter reciprocating the embrace. "I love you."

"I love you too," Dahee says and rubs a hand over the scars on his shoulders. "I'm also proud of how you've gone from rebutting any closeness with Jungkook, to so openly claiming him."

Taehyung jerks away from her to pin his mother with a glare that must be too misty to have any kind of effect.

"What a beautiful progression."

"For the last fucking time, I did *not* claim him," Taehyung says and launches himself into a — whispered — explication of why the Scenting Clusterfuck does not count as claiming.

"He hoarded," Jungkook announces to Jimin, the two of them secluded in a corner of the living room.

"He what?"

"Taehyung made a hoard."

"What do you mean by 'hoard'?"

Jungkook emits a noncommittal sound of confusion. "Don't dragonborns hoard?"

"Yes, we do, but what did Taehyung exactly do?"

"He put the mattress in the corner of the bedroom, and there were a bunch of geodes and gems on it along with blankets and pillows. There were also some of our clothes in it. He said dragonborns can hoard anything, and can that include clothes as wel—"

The drink Jimin sips on must go down the wrong pipe because he coughs. "Fuck. By the Elders."

Jungkook pats Jimin's back.

"This isn't hoarding," Jimin croaks out. "He fucking nested."

"Nest? What's that?"

“It’s a place where we make a cocoon or something like that with things we like, so that we feel safe and comfortable,” Jimin explains. “It can happen at any time, but it particularly does when we’re stressed or upset. Or just because we want to feel good, because making a nest and then being in it makes us happy.”

Jungkook is still lost because Jimin’s reaction makes it seem like Taehyung nesting — if that is a verb? — is a big deal.

“But Taehyung never, and I mean never *ever* nests.” Jimin freezes on his spot. His gaze snaps on Jungkook. “Where were you?”

“In the nest?”

“Directly in it?”

“Yes.”

“In the middle of it?”

“Yes?”

“Taehyung put you there? As in, did he, himself, bring you in his nest? Or did you walk in it?”

“He carried me on his shoulder and laid me on the mattress. Or nest, if this is what you call it.”

Jimin positively gawks at Jungkook. He slams his glass on the table to stride toward Dahee and tug her aside. The two of them whisper to each other. Dahee’s eyes widen then they narrow around a calculating smile before she says something into Jimin’s ears. Jimin is the one to gasp this time. Then, they both dissolve into giggles and they even drag Junhyun toward them to seemingly include him in the gossip.

“Since everyone is here, can we finally talk about everything that has happened before we have to leave for Kaiya?” Yoongi speaks out.

“Yes,” Dahee says after a clear of her throat, her lips twitching. “It is urgent.”

Jungkook does not miss the pompous look she throws in Taehyung’s direction even if he doesn’t understand its origin.

The group gathers in the living room, everyone present for the occasion.

Jungkook finds his place on the armrest of the armchair Taehyung — and soon Revna — occupies.

Yoongi peers at Jungkook. “We’re listening.”

Jungkook speaks, recounting in detail all that had occurred while he had been with Yumi. He also mentions again her necromancy and what he had seen of her familiars along with the appearance-changing vials.

“So she could have been anyone, anywhere at any point,” Hoseok says. “That’s fucking scary. Thank god we’ve got that bracelet.”

“What else has she said?” Seokjin asks.

“According to what Sungmin told Taehyung, my mother is alive, so that’s something to perhaps explore later on. Yumi could help me with this, she may have already met my mother,” Jungkook muses. “As for the most important knowledge she gave me, it regards Revna.”

Revna’s head perks up from where she’s curled on Taehyung’s lap. ***“Revna?”***

“Yes. You.” Jungkook climbs down the armchair to crouch next to it and be at Revna’s eye level. “Do you remember anything from before I found you?”

“Revna doesn’t. But Revna has looots of nightmares.”

“Nightmares about what?”

“A cave. And sometimes a gray mist. And also lots and lots of blood. Revna doesn’t like it.” She drops her head on Taehyung’s leg. ***“It’s scary.”***

“How long has this been going for? You’ve never told me anything,” Jungkook says as he translates her words for everyone else at the same time.

Revna hums. ***“Two ten days? Maybe?”***

Jungkook says as much to the group.

“And how long have you been eating raven nixes?” Taehyung interjects.

“Two ten days…”

“What?”

“She threw up the petal of a raven nix once the spell to locate you was over.”

Jungkook’s mouth parts open. His eyes dart from Taehyung to Revna where it sets. “Revna?”

“Revna is sorry.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Revna is sorry, Kookie.”

“I told you to not eat them! It’s dangerous!”

“Revna knows.”

“Do you?!” Concern and anger swathes Jungkook, prompting tremors in his hands.

“Revna is really sorry.”

“You don’t know what it can do to you! The impact it can have on your body or mind or—” Jungkook pauses when he feels a hand cup his nape. He peers at Taehyung who leans forward and pats Revna’s head with his free hand. “Why… Why?”

“Because it tastes yummy.”

“That’s all?” Jungkook snaps once more and he should be calmer. Yelling never helps. He knows and has experienced this hundreds of times with Seohyung. But he’s terrified because what if something bad happens to Revna now that she has eaten nixes? “You—” He clenches his teeth and straightens up to walk toward the kitchen.

“Why does it taste yummy?” Taehyung calmly asks.

“Revna doesn’t know,” Revna says and Jungkook translates for her.

“Is the taste particular in any way?” Junhyun asks.

“It just tastes yummy.”

“That is quite odd,” Junhyun hums.

“Revna wants to eat more.”

“You are not eating any more of these,” Jungkook snips and serves himself some water. “You must be out of your mind to believe you will.”

“She wouldn’t eat them for no reason,” Taehyung rationalizes and it makes sense but still. “Esp—”

“Right," Jungkook derides. "That must be why—”

“ *Especially* when she knows you’re against it,” Taehyung carries on, and Jungkook subdues at the hard look Taehyung pins him with. "There has to be a reason."

“Revna is a dragonborn.”

Perhaps Jungkook could have eased the whole group into the discovery, as he had intended to in the first place, but he can’t be bothered to do so anymore.

Jungkook watches as Taehyung’s eyes widen along with everyone else’s in the room.

“Remember the shrill?” Jungkook says to Taehyung who nods. “Yumi also noticed how Revna had been affected by it. She confirmed that this shrill only works on dragonborns, and that it has nothing to do with being a reptile, which is also why her lizard isn’t affected by said shrill.”

“But she’s a basilisk,” Namjoon says. “How could she—”

“Basilisks were once people. They were cursed by a warlock and then turned into this snake form,” Jungkook says and he can see the way Taehyung’s thoughts trail back to a similar story they have heard.

“This reminds me of Woosung’s daughter,” Taehyung says.

“I thought the same at the time.”

“His daughter is cursed as well, isn’t she?” Taehyung peers at Dahee who nods with a pensive frown. “She doesn’t have the appearance of a snake, but perhaps the curse of a basilisk can vary in its consequences? Woosung’s daughter has red eyes and a black skin like Revna. She’s also able to manipulate transmutation, something that Woosung’s daughter originally could not do. Plus her arcane is very potent, like Revna’s as well. It might be a stretch but…”

Jungkook huffs out a puff of air as he joins Taehyung again. He slumps down on the armrest, sliding down until he can press himself close to Taehyung and rest his head on his shoulder, gorging onto Taehyung's calm.

Jungkook has never unearthed any kind of information related to her past or the scroll she had been in: no when, why or how. All he knows is that she had evidently been sealed, that it had taken his blood to unseal her and by extension his necromancy.

"What bothers me is that Revna has a very child-like personality and behavior," Jungkook says. "If she truly was a dragonborn once, then it may mean that she was cursed as a *child.* "

A terse silence settles in the room.

"I've had Revna since I was around ten years old. While I grew up, she did too, but never mentally."

"Revna isn't a child. Revna is a big girl."

Jungkook can't contain the chuckle that escapes his mouth. "Yes, you are. But I still estimate her to be between four to six years old at most? It's always been hard to say, but she's young. Really young. No more than ten years old for sure."

"Maybe the curse forced her to keep this mental age?"

"It pains me to say it," Yoongi starts, "but did you ask Yumi?"

"She wasn't sure of much regarding Revna's age," Jungkook sighs. "And I genuinely don't believe for one second that Yumi was lying. She's interested in Revna and wants to know more about her."

"So the baby may be a dragonborn?" Hoseok gasps.

"It's the only explanation that makes sense. She was affected by a sound that only works on dragonborn, and adding to this the fact that she has been eating the bells of the nixes that can only connect with dragonborns… It just— It makes sense," Jungkook concludes.

"Revna knows Taetae. And other dragons."

"What do you mean?"

"Taetae and other dragons smell familiar. Like… Like something Revna smelled before. But Revna or Kookie never met dragons before Taetae."

Jungkook hums. "I see. So you may have met dragonborns before you were sealed."

"Can the curse be removed?"

"That's the main question. Yumi would probably help in some ways because I'm fairly certain she wants to make Revna her next familiar."

"I'd tear her in half before it happens," Taehyung states.

"I know," Jungkook says and pats the back of Taehyung's hand.

“What about the seal on Revna’s head?”

“This is where it’s even stranger. Yumi said it may be related to necromancy, and that it might be why my blood was what it took to free Revna,” Jungkook answers.

“That’s just… great. Great!” Namjoon throws his hands in the air. “Another stone on our path amidst the boulders that have been falling from the sky for the past months! What’s next? The end of the world? Oh wait! It’s already happening for dragonborns!”

“Calm down,” Yoongi sighs.

“How am I supposed to calm down?!”

“Kookie.”

Jungkook glances down at Revna while Namjoon continues to rant.

Revna has this look of unadulterated, palpable excitement in her eyes. ***“That means Revna is a dragon?”***

“It might. We’re not certain yet, but—”

Revna doesn’t bother listening to the remainder of Jungkook's sentence. She hisses and her body straightens up then undulates in the squiggly dance she does when she’s happy. Jungkook still worries regarding the whole raven nix affair, but his lips curl around a smile at Revna’s contagious buzz.

Revna curls around Taehyung’s arm. ***“Taetae!”*** She bumps her snout against his nose. ***“Revna is like you! Revna is a dragon! Revna must be a biiiig dragon.”***

Jungkook laughs and Taehyung chuckles as well after Jungkook’s translation.

“You may be,” Taehyung agrees. “We’d look good next to each other if you're all black.”

“Yes! Kookie too. With Kookie’s flames. Black and white. It’s pretty. Revna loves it. Revna is so happy.”

“Revna,” Jungkook starts and bites back a smile at the way she side-eyes him.

“What…”

“Don’t eat nixes anymore. Please.” Revna makes a soft noise as she moves to curl around both Jungkook and Taehyung’s shoulders. “It’s giving you nightmares. It’s not good for you.”

“Revna is really, really, reaaally sorry. They taste yummy.”

“But you can’t eat them anymore, okay?”

Revna emits a petulant hiss. ***“Okay.”***

“I’m sorry for shouting at you.”

“It’s okay. Kookie worried?”

“Yes, very much so. No one knows what the raven bell of the nixes can do. We have to be careful.”

“Why the hell would she eat them?” Yoongi says. “It makes no sense.”

“Well, nixes solely grow on dragonborn land, so I’m assuming she never got the chance to encounter any at Amaris,” Junhyun ponders. “As Jungkook said, it corroborates the plausibility of her being a dragonborn. It makes me wonder about what kind of properties the raven bells have since they seemingly drink on a dragonborn’s arcane.”

“What we do know is that it gives her nightmares, and that’s enough to make sure she doesn’t eat any again,” Jimin counters.

“Exactly,” Jungkook agrees and surveys Revna. “You have to be safe.”

“Okay Kookie.”

“If not, you’ll be grounded.”

Revna rolls her head in a makeshift eye roll. ***“Fine.”***

Taehyung tentatively raises a hand. “If I may…”

“No,” is Jungkook’s immediate rebuttal because he already knows what Taehyung is about to suggest.

“But—”

“I said no.”

“All I’m saying is that she already ate raven nixes,” Taehyung says and lifts both hands in the air. Revna shuffles so that her head is right next to Taehyung, the two of them peering at Jungkook. “She probably ate a lot.”

“Yes. Revna did…”

“See?” Taehyung points at her.

Jungkook levels them both with a stony stare. “How many did you eat?”

“Dunno. Many dozens.”

Jungkook pinches the bridge of his nose.

“If we let her eat, like, one or two more bells, we could see what it does while of course keeping an eye on everything,” Taehyung proposes.

“What if she dies from this? What if the next bell kills her?”

“If she was to die from them, she would have already. Right?” Taehyung glances at Revna for a support that Revna gives with an enthusiastic nod. “Plus nixes all have healing related properties. *All* of them. So even if we don’t know what the raven bell does, we still know its properties are positive ones. She may be healing something with the raven nixes. Perhaps the curse itself. And I’m not saying we let her feast on a 100 nixes—”

“Revna would eat this many dozens.”

“—but rather just one or two. Maybe five at best. We could collect several raven nix to properly study them together,” Taehyung says. “I think it’d be fun.”

“You think playing with our daughter’s life is fun?” Jungkook teases and as he expects it to happen, a pink hue dusts Taehyung’s cheeks.

Laughter erupts in the living.

“I— She—” Taehyung glances around. “She’s not my daughter. Or our daughter. Shut up!” He snips to Hoseok when the latter makes kissing noises.

“Revna isn’t?” Revna emits a sad hiss.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Taehyung promptly backtracks. “I’m not a father.”

“Taetae doesn't love Revna?” She says and Jungkook continues to translate.

“I didn’t say that! You’re distracting me. Stop it,” Taehyung mutters and boops Revna’s snout. “I’m trying to convince him.”

“Him, is right there."

“We can try. At least one bell,” Taehyung carries on.

“Revna wants to try.”

“No. You just want to eat more,” Jungkook retorts.

“Yes,” Revna says without an ounce of shame.

Jungkook heaves a sigh. “We’ll see after the trip to Kaiya.”

“But is that a ‘yes’?”

“It’s a ‘maybe’.”

“He’s boring, isn’t he?” Taehyung says to Revna who agrees.

“Very boring. Revna prefers Taetae.”

“Hey!” Jungkook says with a faux scowl.

Revna dissolves into a series of happy chirps.

“Moving back to the fact that Revna is mostly likely a dragon,” Jimin starts, “my baby is just like me!”

“Revna is!” She slithers away from Jungkook to join Jimin who takes her in his arms.

Jimin raves about how much he and her will get to fly together and Hoseok joins them, Seokjin also pitching in about how they’ll have to find a way to remove the curse as soon as possible.

Jungkook smiles as he watches those that have become his new family welcome Revna a second time, and perhaps a third in the future as who she truly may be: a dragonborn.

Jungkook feels a hand on his thigh. His gaze finds Taehyung's.

"We'll find a solution for her," Taehyung promises.

"Mhm." Jungkook pecks Taehyung's cheek. "We will."

"The fact that Yumi knows is terrible," Yoongi says. "I don't trust her at all."

"I don't either, but she'll have to be there for Kaiya," Jungkook says. "She may help, and I'd like to know more about necromancy."

"So what are the next steps?" Hoseok asks.

"We visit Kaiya and see what's up with the guardian. Then—" A sneeze interrupts Taehyung. "Then we look for the primordial stone while preparing for the next pulse of the plague. Amidst that, we handle Seohyung and the man with the scent."

"How about a nap?" Namjoon offers. "We can just nap. Forever."

Seokjin laughter rings through the living room. "We should! That would certainly be needed."

"And after all this, a long, long nap," Taehyung sighs.

The group discusses Yumi, Revna and the visit to Kaiya some more, as well as the preparation that will be needed for the upcoming trip.

Jungkook is excited to visit Kaiya. He wonders if he'll see lost souls there, and if yes, what he will have the chance to learn from them. Nothing dire will occur, hopefully. Jungkook could use some peace and something going well for once. Taehyung could too, Jungkook muses, his heart fluttering when he thinks back on all the gifts Taehyung has gotten for him.

A new kind of anticipation swells in him.

He has planned to wear the jacket and earrings Taehyung has given him, and Jungkook wonders how Taehyung will react to his attire. Jungkook smiles in advance as he tucks himself against Taehyung on the armchair, his gaze settled on a happy and chatting Revna.

Taehyung paints that night.

He'd rather be in bed with Jungkook who's fast asleep, however he can't take out of his mind the sight Jungkook had made in the hoard, how pretty the tattoos and black eyes had been.

So Taehyung decides to alter his painting, wanting to include Jungkook's necromancy in it. He paints for a while, sketching the tattoos first that he realizes to be perfectly engraved in his mind.

The glass door opens.

“I thought you’d be stuck to me after what happened,” Jungkook mumbles, his eyes half closed and hair tousled.

“I have a good hearing.”

“What are you painting?”

Taehyung surveys Jungkook who’s standing in the doorway, wearing pajama pants and one of Taehyung’s shirts. “What do you think I’m painting?”

“You’ve been on it for a while, so it must be important.”

“It is.”

Jungkook hums. “Is it something precious? Like a treasure?”

“Something like that,” Taehyung says after a beat.

“You keep answering this and it never clarifies anything,” Jungkook complains. “Is that your constipated way to say yes?”

“You’re annoying.”

Jungkook’s playful gaze finds Taehyung’s. “Will you show me one day?”

Taehyung’s gaze darts on Jungkook again. “You’d like to see?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll show you when I’m done.”

Jungkook makes his little soft sound that pulls at a place near Taehyung’s heart. He extends a hand in front of him. “Come back to bed?”

Taehyung leaves his paintbrush on the easel as he stands, crossing the distance between himself and Jungkook. He doesn’t take Jungkook’s hand, preferring instead to curl his arm around Jungkook’s back and lead them out of the solarium and up to the bedroom.

Taehyung is selfish when he hugs Jungkook, the latter’s back against his chest. Jungkook must feel selfish too because he turns around and wraps an arm over Taehyung to play with his hair. Taehyung scents Jungkook once more, something slow and delicate. Jungkook smells too much like everyone else, and not enough like himself and Taehyung.

Jungkook asks for arcanes kisses afterwards, ever greedy.

Taehyung gives them once more, pressing his fingers against his mouth and then somewhere on Jungkook.

A kiss of lightning on the nose.

A kiss of wind and force that is playfully flicked on the forehead.

A kiss of fire at the corner of a laughing mouth.

A kiss of healing on Jungkook’s temple, to hopefully keep at bay any nightmare.

Jungkook asks for another, a sixth that Taehyung gives him after nipping at the pulp of his own index.

The drop of blood trickles down Taehyung’s finger, dangling for a few seconds. The kiss of blood becomes more of a small ruby that Taehyung places on the tip of Jungkook’s nose. It trickles down the bridge of the nose and passes under the eyelid in an oddly pretty tear.

Jungkook emits a soft chuckle before carrying his own kiss of death above Taehyung’s heart.

The next morning, Taehyung wakes up to the bed dipping next to him.

When he peels his eyes open, he’s met with Jungkook sitting on his knees next to him, a certain glee overtaking his face. Taehyung swears that he can see a hatchling's tail wagging behind Jungkook and a pair of ears twitching on Jungkook’s crown.

“Good morning!”

Taehyung grumbles something intelligible and turns around, yanking the blanket over his head.

“We’re going to Kaiya!”

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry for the length of this update I couldn’t stop writing I was in a trance 😭 I loved writing these two chapters so muuuch, and I had a b l a s t with Yumi's character XDDDDDD

Next step is: Kaiya!! Thank you so so much Rach for inspiring me so much with this forest and its history you created for SLB 🫂🤍

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH24.

The squirrel (it deserves its visual 🙏)
The Thing N°1
The Thing N°2

The Thing N°3
The earrings (pretend that there's no diamonds and that the gold is made of wood and looks line the bones of a hand!!)

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook wearing the lingerie Taehyung gifted to him made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Taehyung bathing Jungkook made by lesbiansexdevil

❧ Art of Taehyung nesting and bringing Jungkook in it made by @riveranil211920
❧ A new Taekook art of the nest scene made by @vkoofroggies
❧ Art of dragon Taehyung and Jungkook made by @riveranil211920
❧ Taekook art of The Thing(s) Incident made by @_yourosewei_

❧ Taekook's house made in The Sims 4 made by @bangvampiretan
❧ Drawing of dragon Taehyung made by @kookiedoughssi

Chapter 25: Journey To Kaiya

Chapter Summary

Taehyung, Jungkook and their family fly to Kaiya.

Chapter Notes

WERE BACK BABY 🤩 More news at the endnotes, I'll jump straight into some rec songs 🫶🤍

These are for most of the chapter, just pick your fav hehe:

1) Song 1
2) Song 2

For the scene starting at "Taehyung glances at Jungkook. Jungkook is already looking at him..." I was listening to We Go Down Together again, still obsessed 😪

Cw:

1) blood (it's gonna be a very present tag for CH25/26/27 hbjsbas)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

◯◯ *Somewhere, someone, some day* ◯◯

His vision blurs. He shakes his head but it does nothing to mitigate the dizziness that submerges him. His wings carry him lower to the ground but they falter at some point.

He crashes down.

The trees break beneath him.

His breath pouch hurts.

The arcane that swirls there feels weak, in a way it never has before. Something is eating him from the inside, virulent and starved.

Desperate.

He grunts as he rises on his talons. His wings bat up and down to carry him at the entrance of the lair in the mountain. He drops down to his human self. Being in his dragon form is too exhausting. He braces himself against the wall as he walks inside the tunnel.

A sudden coughing fit rattles through him. He falls to his knees, unable to keep himself up. He coughs up in his hand, feeling as though his breath pouch is eroding. When he pulls his fingers away seconds later, liquid trickles between them.

Through the glaze his darkening vision has become, he sees the splatters of blood that coat his palm, and footsteps are the last thing his mind picks up on before he passes out.

○○ *Now* ○○

The trip to Kaiya is slightly delayed. It does not stop Jungkook from sporadically waking Taehyung up at 7 am for the next few days as he musters the energy and excitement that would put to shame a young hatchling.

Taehyung doesn't have the heart to be annoyed at each unnecessary morning call. Jungkook's buzz is one Taehyung himself experiences, even more when Jungkook chats about what they may encounter in the arcanic forest. Plus it's contagious.

And endearing.

Jungkook is really, *really* cute. Especially when it bunches up his cheeks and scrunches his nose, or when Jungkook's lisp becomes a little more prominent, or when Taehyung can nearly see Jungkook's eyes shine with—

"You were so jealous."

"I most certainly was not."

"You can admit it. It won't kill you. Here, let me show you." Jungkook's head peeks from the corner of the stairs. "I was jealous of Haneul."

"You were?"

"*Obviously."* Jungkook makes his way back up to the bathroom. "He was flirting with you and talking about your past like it was some grand thing. Part of me was annoyed because it was humiliating, and the other part was mad because you're my husband. No one gets to flirt with you."

"You're a crazy viper."

"Yes. And you were a jealous dragon."

"I was not."

"You were one breath away from burning Woobin to a crisp and I know it wasn't only due to the pretense, if the whole scenting moment that had happened afterwards was any hint."

"Hm? Scenting? No clue what you're talking about." Taehyung smiles when he catches Jungkook's snickers from upstairs.

"You're lucky that denial looks good on you!"

"Shut up."

"You were jealous, pouting about your loaves."

"I don't care enough to be jealous of anything or anyone."

"Whatever you say, jealous dragon."

"I'm not a jealous dragon."

"That's right. You're *my* jealous dragon."

"Oh fuck off."

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

"And finish preparing yourself, the others will arrive soon."

"Yes, yes, husband of mine."

Taehyung sighs to himself, way too fondly for his taste and also Revna's who rolls her head. "Could you kill a dragon with your venom?" He asks, resuming their conversation. "Because you did when we fought the pig after the manor, right?" Revna nods and she nibbles at Taehyung's fingers, as she tends to do whenever she grows upset at the language barrier between them. "Your arcane is really potent, but I wonder to which extent. Maybe you could kill a dragon of my size with one bite."

Revna further slides down Taehyung's shoulders to tilt her head and display her fangs to Taehyung.

"No. We won't try, you damn brat."

Revna erupts in a series of amused clicks.

"We could try on Seungwon, though." Taehyung snickers to himself, Revna echoing his hilarity. "Also, you have got to stop leaving piles of dead rodents at the doorstep. I nearly stepped on a

bunny this morning."

Revna draws a *'J'* on the back of Taehyung's hand.

"I know it's for Jungkook's training, but even then, at least put them to the side. Maybe I could make some kind of box where you could store them?" Taehyung proposes and Revna gives her approval with a bump of her snout. "I'll finish your playground first, yes? But Jimin, Hoseok and my mom want to help with it since we'll have to expand the solarium, so it's taking longer than anticipated."

Taehyung chuckles when Revna's body undulates in her wiggly dance.

Revna had asked — or rather demanded — Taehyung to build her some kind of playground with trees to climb up and obstacles to play with. Taehyung had, of course, immediately accepted, and had at the time been leveled with a pointedly arched brow from Jungkook, the motion punctuated with a *'Keep spoiling her so much, and I might grow jealous.'* Taehyung's answer had come in the form of a lightning kiss he had pressed at the back of Jungkook's ear with two fingers, and the blush that had flushed Jungkook's cheeks had been worth the teasing.

Taehyung continues reading a book recounting Amaris' history. He's already dressed in his black armor, a satchel slung over his chest. The latter is filled with some necessities along with the vials Minsoo had given him to treat the remnants of his 'broken heart syndrome' that Taehyung still denies the near 'fatality' of.

He had just been depressed and petrified by fear.

Not dying, he scoffs to himself.

"Hello, Lovely," Jungkook greets Revna once downstairs as she slithers away from Taehyung. "Are you ready?" A hiss answers him. "I'm so excited too! I wonder how many dead there are in Kaiya. Probably more than we could ever imagine. Do you think they still have their souls?" Another sequence of hisses erupts that he hums to. "I'm not sure, actually. Kaiya seems quite special." Revna snorts. "Not as special as you are, yes, yes."

A scent distracts Taehyung from where he's hunched over the kitchen counter, his back to the living room. His head twists around.

He stares at Jungkook.

He stares some more, as this might be the only thing his brain is capable of achieving at that moment.

Jungkook is wearing some pretty snug leather pants and Taehyung *knows* this because his stare — unwillingly — drops on the toned thighs elegantly sculpted by the fabric. Taehyung has been confronted with them quite a lot lately, especially when Jungkook decides that pajama bottoms aren't of crucial necessity when he can just wear one of Taehyung's long shirts. Whenever it happens, Taehyung tries to pretend that the internal happy rumble belongs to his territorial dragon, rather than to his own cupidity that is fulfilled when Jungkook throws on Taehyung's garments.

He doesn't revel *that* much in seeing the Viper dressed in his clothes, but he can't deny that it does render him quite pompous at the very least.

There's just *something* about it.

The newfound knowledge Taehyung acquires today is that leather is a lot stretchier than he'd first assumed. It's particularly noticeable when Jungkook bends forward to pick up Revna, Taehyung's gaze flickering a tad below the lower back.

Taehyung clears his throat.

Nevertheless, the pants look sturdy, Taehyung concludes after one last inspection before peering at Jungkook's jacket.

It's the one Taehyung had gifted to him, the buckles and strings dangling along Jungkook's spine. Taehyung had specifically picked this one because it had reminded him of the corsets Jungkook loves to wear, and Taehyung prides himself for his forthcoming when he can already see how nicely the jacket will fit once properly fastened.

"It'll probably be for the best if you stay inside the ruby once we're in Kaiya, yes," Jungkook says and tucks a strand behind his ear, revealing the earring Taehyung had carved for him. "Just in case, alright?" Jungkook hasn't bothered with any product in his hair, the latter left more natural and unruly, exactly how Taehyung likes it.

Taehyung is *all over* Jungkook.

Jungkook is wearing Taehyung's earring, Taehyung's jacket, Taehyung's wedding ring, Taehyung's wedding pendant of a white scale, Taehyung's marks even if concealed by some makeup.

Then, there's his scent that has permeated Jungkook's.

He hasn't scented him today, yet this whiff of smoky storm envelops the Viper. It's musky too, for some reasons, so pungent and appetizing that something a bit hungry and wholly pleased unfurls within Taehyung as he feels a pull in his eyes.

Jungkook swivels on his feet. "Oh." His gaze darts across Taehyung's form. "You look really good."

"Why do you smell so much like me?"

"Hm? You scented me a few days ago."

"No. I mean, yes. But your scent is… You smell *a lot* like me. It's as if I scented you this morning even though I didn't and it's—" Taehyung sniffs the air. "It's different too?"

"Oh. Oh!" Jungkook averts his gaze while Revna slides down his legs to vanish somewhere in the solarium. He fiddles with a loose buckle at the front of his vest, a redness blooming on the tip of his ears. "I may have done something… Something weird and a little… Maybe a tiny bit disgusting? Kind of. I don't believe it was that bad but now that I'm about to say it out loud maybe it was and — And. Uhm. Yes."

Taehyung's eyes narrow. "What is it."

Jungkook pointedly looks outside the bay windows, his words growing more and more muttered. "I would like to preface this by saying that it is your fault for not scenting me this morning."

“Sure. I’ll take the blame, Viper. Now spit it out.”

“I was tossing my dirty clothes in the hamper, right? As one does with their dirty clothes. And in it there was the pajama shirt you had on for four or five days. So I… I took it,” Jungkook shyly mutters, one of his hands concealing his mouth.

“Okay? That’s not the first time you steal—”

“Borrow.”

“Borrow one of my—”

“I smelled it,” Jungkook mumbles against both of his palms that are now fully covering his flushed face.

“You wha—”

“I smelled it. Don’t ask me why because I don’t know. But I did it. And it smelled like… Like sweat, of course. And you. But it wasn’t bad and it’ll probably sound weird I’m sorry but I actually thought it smelled good because it was your scent and it just reminded me of you and it was musky but the good kind and it was also a little smoky and rain-like so it was overall a really nice blend of your scent which is entirely your fault as I said," he blurts out in one breath.

The book Taehyung is holding breaks at the spine.

“And I thought that— That if *I* could smell it, then you would too. So I took your shirt and rubbed it on my throat before I put the makeup on. I also rubbed it on my wrists. And on my nape. A— And a bit on my face. ‘Cause it really smelled nice and I was also thinking of how Woobin will be there for the trip so I thought it’d make your dragon happy to see that I smell like you. Then I sniffed it one last time. I mean, a couple last times. Maybe it was a bit more than a couple… But it smelled so good, I swear to God. Although I hope no God watched me…” The rest of Jungkook’s sentence is too intelligible for Taehyung to decipher it. “M’shutting up now.”

Taehyung blinks a few times.

It’s only when Jungkook peeks through his fingers then lowers his hands over his mouth that Taehyung says “You did *what?”*

“I scented myself ‘cause you didn’t,” Jungkook mumbles, full of defiance and complaint. “I thought it’d be fine since dragonborns give a lot of importance to scents, and Minsoo once alluded to the fact that dragonborns enjoy the scent of sweat. So… I figured that if I liked the scent on your shirt, you would like it even more on me.” He glances at Taehyung before peering down again.

“That’s…”

Jungkook hugs his own chest. “Was that not okay?”

Taehyung turns to lean against the kitchen counter, feeling a little weak. *Jungkook scented himself with Taehyung's worn shirt.* “Jimin told you to do this?”

“No. I just did it. You didn’t reply.”

“It’s something mates do.”

“Uh?”

“The dirty clothes thing,” Taehyung clarifies and coyly faces Jungkook again. “Because the scent is more natural and potent on dirty clothes. I remember Jimin doing this with his ex boyfriend. They’d exchange worn clothes and make nests from them.”

“Oh… I didn’t know. Sorry.”

Silence floats in the room that neither of them breaks for a moment.

“Are you annoyed?” Jungkook eventually asks.

“No. Why would I be?”

“Why are you looking at me like this, then?”

“Like what?”

Jungkook clasps his hands behind his back and there’s a certain anticipation that drapes over his form. “Like you had when you had found a griffin to hunt at the campfire.”

Taehyung hums to himself, his gaze not straying away from Jungkook. He knows his eyes are golden, their shift out of his control. He can also tell his arcane wants to be in contact with Jungkook, a new kind of confusing yearning.

“Say,” Jungkook starts, one of his shoes shuffling on the floor, “how soon can we have that chase?”

Now, Taehyung has half a mind to say. “Whenever we’ll have free time, so not today.”

Jungkook’s huff is accompanied with an eye roll. “I didn’t even say anything.”

“I know you,” Taehyung chuckles, a smile floating on his lips when one curls Jungkook’s. “When are the others supposed to arrive?”

“Any time now?”

Taehyung drums his fingers. He peeps in the garden.

It’s empty.

He tosses the broken book on the counter. He cards a hand through his hair as he makes his way toward Jungkook. Taehyung arches a brow then hums a chuckle when Jungkook makes an aborted backward motion.

“Taeh—”

Before Jungkook can move any further, let alone run away, Taehyung deftly trips him with a foot. He seizes Jungkook by the waist to soften the fall as the two of them tumble on the couch.

Taehyung braces himself with a knee between Jungkook’s. “Why have the chase if you get caught so easily?”

“You speak like I didn’t let you catch me.”

“Brat.”

Taehyung cups the underside of Jungkook’s jaw, pleased when the latter responds to the mute request and lolls his head to the side. He dips his head in Jungkook’s neck, mindful of the makeup there, however he grows bolder when he reaches Jungkook’s ear that he knows to be free of any marking.

“Careful with the makeup.”

Jungkook’s face is accessible though, and so Taehyung drags his nose and forehead to the cheek that he lightly nuzzles, eliciting a not so elegant snort from the prince below him.

“That tickles.”

“We really need to change your body wash,” Taehyung complains for the umpteenth time.

“So you’ve said.”

Taehyung’s thumbs tease the hem of Jungkook’s pants and he waits for a *‘Go ahead’* before sliding his hands underneath the shirt and loose jacket. He allows his arcane to skim across Jungkook’s skin as he cups the petite waist, his wrists passing there. Taehyung internally grins when he thinks about how Woobin will have no other choice but to smell the blend of Taehyung and Jungkook's scent.

Jungkook’s fingers find their way on the back of Taehyung’s head. “Don’t lick me.”

“How about you shut up?”

Jungkook bursts into laughter.

Taehyung bites the lobe in retaliation, and the sound that escapes Jungkook’s lips is breathy and a little high and overall peculiar.

Taehyung jerks back.

Jungkook smacks a hand over his mouth, peering up at Taehyung with widened eyes.

“Did you just—”

“I did not.”

“That was a m—”

“It was not!”

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “By the Elders.”

“Shut up.”

“Do you enjoy pain that much or—”

“I don’t! I don’t, I don’t, I don’t.” Jungkook breaks into a litany of *‘Shut up’* that he drills in Taehyung’s arm with punches.

“I can’t believe you fucking *moaned.* Do you have no shame?”

“I didn’t moan! Stop it!” Jungkook shoves at Taehyung’s chest. “Shut up. And this is your fault. *Again.* For doing this— This kind of thing to me. Stop laughing! You’re so annoying.”

Taehyung muffles his laughter against Jungkook's shoulder. His breath puffs there and his smile grows when a shudder runs through Jungkook.

“You get high on my scent. You’ve got no room to judge.”

Touché.

“And you licked me, which is worse than a moan that I did *not* make.”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.” Jungkook’s retort is softened by the way he gently combs through Taehyung’s strands.

Feeling playful, Taehyung makes one last nibble on Jungkook’s lobe.

“Stop it,” Jungkook squirms.

Taehyung leans back to peer at Jungkook, the latter’s face knitted into a flustered frown. “Do you actually like it?”

A smile breaks on Jungkook’s lips. “It tingles. It feels nice.”

Taehyung tweaks Jungkook’s hip. “That tingled too?”

“You’re genuinely so infuriating.” Jungkook falls mute for a few seconds. “But yes. It did.” He smacks Taehyung’s shoulder. “That tingled too?” He says in a gross imitation of Taehyung.

Taehyung flicks Jungkook’s nose. “Fucking brat.”

Even if Jungkook has scented himself with a shirt, Taehyung still rubs his inner wrists on Jungkook’s nape, angles of the jaw and clavicles, also passing them on the waist again that Taehyung can’t refrain himself from cupping every few seconds. Taehyung is hit by another wave of contentment at the view of his pendant laying near Jungkook’s head, right next to the dangling, bone-like earring.

Jungkook chuckles. “I’m so happy.”

“Why?”

“I never would have guessed that the gruff dragonborn who hated humans so much could turn out to be such a clingy, needy hatchling with me.”

Taehyung wouldn’t have guessed it either, and Jungkook's remark elicits a flare of agitation that Taehyung tries to tame down. It does not work very well.

Taehyung straightens up, needing some distance.

“I have to finish dressing up,” Jungkook says, softly smiling. “And I need help with the jacket.”

“Why do you always have to wear such complex clothes?”

“*You* bought that for me.”

Taehyung doesn’t grace the rightful comment with one of his own. Instead, he fully pushes himself off Jungkook. He rises on his feet then lowers into a crouch at the foot of the sofa, in front of Jungkook who sits up.

He takes Jungkook’s hand and brings the wrist to his face. Taehyung gives it a sniff. He picks up on the traces his worn shirt has left behind, but also on the floral grim and caramel singular to Jungkook. “You smell wonderful,” he murmurs against Jungkook’s inner wrist before he can stop himself.

His gaze meets Jungkook’s shy one.

“Thank you…”

Taehyung pulls Jungkook up with him, but the latter takes this as an invitation to twirl around with a cheeky smile once on his feet. Taehyung bites back a grin as he spins Jungkook to have him face away. “Dumbass.”

“We never got that dance at the wedding.”

“I know.”

“I want to have it.”

“Then we’ll have it,” Taehyung says with simplicity.

Jungkook’s head turns to lay a kiss on Taehyung’s cheek “You do like spoiling me."

Taehyung doesn’t bother denying. He grabs the strings and buckles and begins to fasten everything at the back, taking his time to do so. “Is this tight enough?”

“A little bit more.”

Taehyung obeys, and when Jungkook makes a noise of approval, he properly closes the clasps.

He’s reminded again of how much he enjoys taking care of Jungkook in such ways, and how he had done the same last night when Jungkook had shyly asked Taehyung to wash his hair, or when, afterwards, Taehyung had selected what shirt Jungkook would wear for bed.

Taehyung remembers how he had thought of the bed in his bedroom as theirs, and how the thought has thrown him in a disconcerted loop of *'Why?'*

“Is it comfortable?”

“Mhm. It’s perfect.”

Taehyung doesn’t preen, per se, but a pride does swell in him. He had chosen well. “Good.”

There are a couple more buckles that have to be attached at the front. Taehyung uses this as an excuse to allow this new and still tentative greed to poke its head out and get some fare. He steps closer, curling his arms around Jungkook and propping his chin on the shoulder.

He internally sighs at the peace that swathes him. It smothers the growing voice that hasn't stopped nagging in agitation for the past days.

Hands rest on Taehyung's. "I can finish—"

"Let me."

Jungkook's palms release their hold to loosely wrap around Taehyung's forearms.

Taehyung is even slower now, partially due to the distraction Jungkook's neck presents that he fleetingly scents. He tightens the buckles to Jungkook's liking, and once done, he flattens his hands on Jungkook's navel, his mouth grazing the nape.

"There's no makeup there."

"I know."

"Maybe you should give me a reason to put some."

Taehyung stills. Then he tilts his head to find Jungkook's playful gaze. "You're such a damn brat."

Jungkook has the impudence to laugh. "I'm well aware, but is that a yes?"

"It's a: *'my dragon is back in its cage because it had enough sustenance to last a century.* " Taehyung catches a whiff of bitterness from Jungkook, gone so fast that he's not certain he has smelled it correctly.

"You're terribly dull."

Taehyung nips at Jungkook's shoulder. Jungkook snickers. Taehyung leans his weight against Jungkook as he heaves a deep sigh.

He's curious about Kaiya and what they may see there, however the sleepier and warmer he grows while holding Jungkook, the less he wants to leave.

"I don't want to go anymore."

"To Kaiya?" Jungkook asks. Taehyung hums and Jungkook laughs again. "Why not?"

"I want to stay here."

"Well. We can. We don't *have* to go to Kaiya."

"But it could help with the plague, and if not, it'll still be an interesting place to visit. Plus it's not like we can avoid the subject of the plague forever. The next pulse is in a few days."

"Yeah…" Jungkook's fingers tighten around Taehyung. "But you know what?" He swivels to face Taehyung. Akin to everything that has been unraveling between them, it's natural when Taehyung's palms find their place on the dip of Jungkook's spine, while Jungkook's curl around Taehyung's

neck. “When everything is resolved with the plague, Seohyung, Dohyun, Revna *and* the Council that may want to throw you to jail, we’ll go on holidays together.”

“Seems like you’ve been pondering about this already.”

Jungkook pensively peers at the ceiling. “Since the manor?”

Taehyung emits an amused huff. “Do you have a place in mind?”

“Not really. I thought we could decide together. Anywhere is good as long as there’s you and Revna. Either way we should go out now before they bore a hole through the window.”

“Huh?”

Taehyung follows the direction Jungkook looks at.

Jimin, Seokjin, Namjoon and Hoseok all have their faces pressed against the glass of the bay window, their hands framing their eyes to spy inside the house.

A heat crawls up Taehyung’s neck.

“Obnoxious weasels.” Taehyung steps away from Jungkook and marches out of the house as he swings the door open. “What the fuck did I say about the house.”

“To not step inside,” Jimin and Hoseok say in unison.

“A rule we didn’t breach since we’re technically outside,” Namjoon adds.

“Aren’t you so taken by Jungkook, Taehyung?” Seokjin grins and pats Taehyung's shoulder. “I still remember tales of a grumbling husband, unwilling to love.”

“Still me.”

“You sure?” Namjoon says. Taehyung’s glare darts at him. Namjoon’s hands raise in the air. “I wasn’t defying you. Just saying.”

“Stop scaring him,” Jungkook intervenes with a pinch of Taehyung’s arm.

The corner of Taehyung’s mouth quirks up. “It’s fun.”

“I’m not scared,” Namjoon mutters.

Taehyung surveys the group awaiting him outside.

His parents are present along with his grandfather, the three dressed in their respective lighter armor. Yoongi is also here, a dark cloak slung over his shoulders and fastened at the front with a golden chain.

Taehyung feels a gaze on him and he finds the source seconds later. He walks up to the flier for the trip. “Elder Miseon,” he says after a clear of his throat.

“Taehyung,” Elder Miseon smiles. “How are you? Have you been resting well?”

“My apologies for how I treated you during Jungkook's disappearance.”

Miseon's smile grows. "You are forgiven, even if there is nothing to apologize for. I understood back then."

"Still. I was disrespectful to you. I knew where you were coming from, I simply didn't care," Taehyung says with a glance at Jungkook who's discussing with Seokjin.

"Come with." Miseon motions with her hand, leading Taehyung to the long cart the group will use as their transportation vessel. "The Elders were worried," she quietly starts once out of earshot of any prying friend. "I have handled it, however."

"Do they want to send me to Bastille?"

Elder Miseon sighs. "They believe Bastille itself would be ill-equipped to contain a chaos dragon of your scope, if it were to go that far."

"But they've pondered about it," Taehyung summarizes. "So what. They want me dead too now?"

"No," Miseon frowns. "The Elders do not meddle with such matters in such ways. We are no gods, Taehyung. We're simply old, curious, partially immortal dragons. However they *are* keeping an eye on you and your arcane, as I have told you before."

Taehyung nods.

"A visit will be required soon. You will then have the chance to ask them questions yourself. They also have quite a few inquiries that have expanded after witnessing the way your anguish had darkened the sky."

"I see." Taehyung shuffles on his spot, embarrassed for some reason. "What did they say about it?"

Elder Miseon laughs. "They asked one singular question."

"Which is?"

"*'Are the chaos dragon and necromancer mates?'"*

Taehyung makes an aborted sound of confusion. He looks over his shoulder to make sure no one is listening, then he says "What?"

"You would be surprised at how prevalent gossiping is amongst the Elders. It is a pleasant pastime we cherish deeply."

"Why would they ask this," Taehyung grumbles to himself. "It wasn't relevant to what happened."

Miseon shrugs. "Gossips."

"Was that really all?" Taehyung's gaze settles on Miseon's unreadable one. "They won't try to use Jungkook as leverage against me, right?"

"They will not. They were merely noisy," Miseon assures. "In truth, they seem to appreciate how Jungkook can appease your arcane."

Taehyung doesn't know if he fully shares Miseon's certainty regarding the Elder's intentions, but he tucks the doubts at the back of his mind for now. "Do the Elders really blab that much?"

“All. The. *Time.*”

Taehyung snickers. “Even the Oracle?”

“The Oracle is the worst of all. They can see anything and everything. You will always find them chuckling to themselves,” Miseon smiles. “However, rest assured that the Elders only have one goal in mind: dragonborns’ prosperity. That is all.”

“I’m no danger to dragonborns.”

“Not willingly so.”

Taehyung subdues.

“Regarding our issue...”

Taehyung tenses. He darts a look at Minsoo, and when something sinks in his chest, he smooths his expression to indifference. “What about it?”

“The Elders are nonplussed by the information given to them. It aids, but not as much as we would hope so. It has simply confirmed what we had already guessed. Meanwhile, there will be one last cluster of death the day before spring’s pulse. This last cluster is the least broad one, yet the most virulent one in return. Very few will die from it, however it will kill instantly, rather than in a few days,” Elder Miseon says, her voice laced with concern. "The plague is worsening."

Worry wrenches Taehyung’s guts. “Everything will be fine. We’ll find a remedy.”

“We will.” Miseon’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes this time. “Have you and Minsoo told Dahee? Or anyone else?”

“No. They can’t know. Not now.”

“Taehyu—”

“Especially not my mother.”

“You are underestimating her.”

Taehyung's gaze drifts away from Minsoo. “I don’t know.”

“Lies by omission are still lies, Taehyung. They will not appreciate your dishonesty.”

“We’ll take their anger over their sorrow.”

“That I can respect to some extent,” Elder Miseon sighs while ruffling Taehyung’s hair. “You have grown a lot, but you are still too impudent.”

Taehyung’s lips purse around a muttered retort, relieved that Miseon isn’t nursing any lingering resentment.

“That’s a lot of people.”

Taehyung swivels around at the familiar voice. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

“Jimin told you I’d join. I thought you’d enjoy my company,” Woobin grins but skedaddles away when Jimin lightly smacks the back of his head.

“Is it still fine if he’s here? He’s scared,” JImin quietly adds. “He doesn’t want to be alone in case Seungwon searches for him.”

“Keep an eye on him and make sure he behaves,” is all that Taehyung says.

“Quite the group indeed,” Miseon agrees. “However as long as you respect Kaiya and its last guardian, among other tasks to be achieved, everything should be alright. For the most part.”

Hoseok loudly gulps. “For the most part?”

“There is a chest attached at the front of the carriage if anyone wishes to leave their armor there during the travel,” Elder Miseon discards with a wink at Hoseok, her voice carrying across the garden. “The flight will last for the major part of the day.”

“Thank the Elders, quite literally so,” Junhyun jests.

Seokjin erupts in a loud laughter and smacks a palm on Junhyun’s shoulder.

Taehyung searches for a head that he finds away from the group. He walks up to Yoongi who's sifting through an arcanic book, not without throwing a scrutinizing glance at Woobin.

“Warlock.”

“Reptile,” Yoongi greets back without missing a beat.

“Do you have your arcane-detecting ring with you?” When Yoongi shakes his head, Taehyung continues. “I don’t like Woobin tagging along with us. I know Jimin trusts him, and that Woobin *did* help when he warned us about the Council’s plans, but still.”

Yoongi closes his book that he tucks under his cloak. “Don’t tell Jimin, but I used the ring on Woobin this morning when I was at Jimin’s house. I was wondering the same thing as you, but it didn’t detect anything in particular. No signs of a tracker or of any external arcane.”

Taehyung’s shoulders relax. “I’m still worried he might be some kind of hidden decoy, whether he knows about it or not.”

“You know Seungwon best, but do you believe he has the wisdom to do something like this?”

“Seungwon? No. He’s a fucking buffoon. But the man with the scent? Yes. And Seungwon works for him. Or used to, at least. The man with the scent has just been awfully quiet, and the last time he had been, the manor mess happened. Maybe it’s just my paranoia talking, but Woobin could be some kind of unsuspecting spy for the man with the scent. Maybe he’s using Woobin as a way to stay in touch with me and keep track of what I’m doing or—”

“Dohyun isn’t here.” There’s something akin to understanding in Yoongi's tone. “Don't spiral from the fear of being back with him. It can be irrational and consuming, but don’t let it drown you.”

“You…" Taehyung surveys Yoongi anew. "You went through this before."

“Let’s just say I’ve experienced someone’s poisonous ‘love’ before,” Yoongi answers with dismissive quotes. “Not like you had. The old man had good intentions. Was still shitty.”

“Is he alive?”

“He should be.”

“Does he represent any danger for you that we should be careful of?”

Yoongi huffs a small chuckle. “No. He’s probably dying alone of old age somewhere.”

Taehyung nods. “Good.”

“Killing isn’t the solution to every enemy or ailments we have, especially for you who would be thrown to Bastille the second the Council finds the chance to,” Yoongi quips with a quirk of his brow.

“But doesn’t it make life so much more stress free?” Taehyung jests.

“Maybe before your husband became a necromancer.”

Taehyung unwillingly barks out a laugh at that. “Whatever, warlock. Thanks, I guess,” he says and begins to walk back to the group.

“I keep an eye on Woobin, you keep an eye on Yumi. Deal?”

Taehyung doesn’t look behind when he throws a thumbs up over his shoulder.

After everyone has dressed down to more comfortable clothes, Taehyung does the same, now left in pants and a long sleeved shirt.

He’s cold, which isn’t too odd considering how freezing the winter air is, however he shouldn’t be feeling it as much as he currently does. So he goes through the roulette of his breaths. He summons his fire.

Nothing happens.

Taehyung stills.

The absence reads like a reminder of what had once occurred at the manor.

He shuffles his breaths a second time. Then a third. He does it again and again because maybe the next time will be the one where flames will coat his hands. However there’s still no fire. No warmth that courses through his limbs.

His heart resounds between his ears, drowning everything else.

Taehyung peers at his hand. He switches to lightning, and when no bolt dances between his fingers, he closes his eyes. He slowly inhales and exhales to tame down the coldness that seeps into him. *He’s fine.* It’s not like the manor. His arcane is still here, he just needs to bring it forth.

He fully visualizes a roulette in his mind. He carefully drags the arrow on the fire segment but it’s as though it can’t quite find a spot to slot into. Taehyung doesn’t give it any choice and forces the

arrow to carve its own groove in the fire segment.

When he opens his eyes, small flames flicker on his hand.

“Everything okay?”

Taehyung startles at the sound of Jungkook’s voice. He hides his trembling fingers in the pocket of his pants. “You scared me. You’re always so quiet.”

“You seemed lost in thought.” Jungkook cups Taehyung’s wrist. “You’re cold.”

“Weird, right? It’s not like we're in the middle of one of the most frigid winters there ever—”

“You know what I mean," Jungkook cuts off without humour. "Minsoo said your arcane might be depleted for longer than anticipated after what happened at the island.”

“I’m letting it rest as much as I can.”

“Is your arcane really alright after everything?”

Taehyung had promised to Jungkook that he wouldn’t lie to him. He tries not to, but he does not say the full truth. "Not really. It's been heavily depleted, kinda like after the manor, except that here I'm not comatose for two weeks. I’m checking in every day with Minsoo, though. It’s why he’s here today, in case my arcane decides to get a little funky once inside a place like Kaiya.”

"We'll figure it out together, alright?” Jungkook rubs his thumb on Taehyung’s wrist before letting go. “Hopefully there won’t be any fight.”

“We won’t be alone if there’s one.”

“True. And I’m here too.”

Taehyung wants to reach for Jungkook but does not. “You are.”

After placing a kiss on Taehyung’s cheek, Jungkook leaves to rejoin the rest of the group.

Taehyung’s teeth grit together. He rearranges the placement of his armor in the chest, his motions curt. He hisses when he accidentally nips a finger, the skin catching between the metal. “Fuck.”

“Everything will come around to bite us in the ass.”

Taehyung slams the chest shut. “And what else do you suggest?” He snips at his grandfather. “We can’t tell them now. It’ll have to wait after Kaiya.”

“Secrets always come out, kid.”

“I know that.”

“Good.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright, kid,” Minsoo says, arms crossed over his chest. “Your arcane?”

“I—” Taehyung nervously peers at Minsoo. “I struggled to summon any of my breaths.”

“When?”

“Minutes ago.”

Minsoo’s nose furls around a snarl that vanishes moments later. “Should’ve stopped you at the island. Making that damn storm was—”

“I wouldn’t have let you. You know this.”

Minsoo grumbles some more as he twists to place his armor in the chest. He plucks a vial from a pocket that he swiftly hands to Taehyung.

Taehyung flicks the cap open and discreetly downs the golden content. The concoction tastes horrid as most remedies made by Minsoo do, but it immediately soothes the ache in Taehyung’s chest. When he summons his breaths, they all easily manifest themselves, even if weakly.

“Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Minsoo wordlessly walks off to help Elder Miseon fasten the ropes at the top of the carriage.

“Since I’m human,” Namjoon starts, “will I die if I enter Kaiya?”

“No, you won’t. However you may die for other reasons,” Miseon booms from afar, her amusement evident.

Namjoon laughs. “Right. Of course.” His face contorts the more Miseon’s settles in a solemn expression. “You’re joking, right? Elder Miseon?”

“I can raise you if you die,” Jungkook offers.

“Can you stop with that raising nonsense? It’s terrifying and I do *not* want to think about you raising me from the dead.”

“I wonder if it’d be painful,” Yoongi hums.

“The brain would be dead, no?” Seokjin pipes in. “So there wouldn’t be anything to send pain signals to the rest of the body.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know what kind of effect raising a dead has on them, if I simply control their body, or if I awake them with some kind of consciousness,” Jungkook muses, his earrings swaying when he tilts his head.

“I still can’t believe you can do that,” Woobin shudders with an uncomfortable smile. “I thought my father had gone insane when he told me.”

“It’s pretty neat, isn’t it? Taehyung said it was fascinating to watch,” Jungkook grins with a pride that is so endearing Taehyung can’t help but smile at it as he reclines against the carriage's trunk.

“I don’t know about fascinating,” Woobin winces, “but it’s certainly peculiar.”

Taehyung surveys the group further down the garden, but his straying gaze always finds its way back on Jungkook no matter what.

Jungkook is laughing at something, his nose scrunched up and bunny teeth peeking out. His eyes flits away from Namjoon to settle on Taehyung who does his best to remain impassible in spite of the contentment that swirl in him at having Jungkook's attention on him.

Maybe Taehyung *is* a bit of a needy hatchling, but none would hear it from him, and certainly not the recipient of it. It's all his dragon's fault anyway.

Jungkook's eyes become fully black as tattoos color his neck. He brings the tip of his index and middle fingers to his mouth. Then, and in a feat that warms the tip of Taehyung's ears with shame, Jungkook blows a flying kiss at Taehyung in a thread of raven flames. The kiss of death is aerial when it lands on Taehyung's cheek and vanishes there.

Taehyung levels Jungkook with a stony look. Jungkook arches a brow. Taehyung mirrors him. Jungkook scowls and points at his own cheek. Taehyung rolls his eyes in return. It's only when Jungkook crosses his arms over his chest that Taehyung relents.

He allows his lightning and wind to flicker out of his mouth and curl around two of his fingers. Taehyung doesn't blow the flying kiss as much as he flicks it. The bead of arcane touches Jungkook's forehead and scatters there in tiny bolts that Jungkook shivers at with a smile. Taehyung's lips curl up. He shakes his head when Jungkook mouths a *'Thank you'*.

"Awww."

Taehyung's gaze darts around, noticing how the entire group is looking at him and Jungkook.

"Aren't they cute?" Jimin croons with a wiggle of his brows.

"The most," Hoseok sighs.

Taehyung flips them the bird.

"If everyone is ready," Elder Miseon intervenes to Taehyung's relief, "we may leave."

As if on cue, a door manifests in the middle of the garden.

A woman steps out of it, accompanied by the lizard and boulder familiars. She looks like Yumi, however there's something different about her, more notably about her outerwear that is composed of a white kimono this time. Her hair is half pulled up into a messy up-do, the red hair sticks echoed by the red of her lips that stretch upward. "Hello!"

No one replies.

A terseness drapes over the group.

Yumi's head darts left and right, and underneath this veneer of enthusiasm, Taehyung can pick up on how she assesses Elder Miseon's presence. The lizard on her crown hums a faint tune that she nods at. Her curious gaze drifts on Taehyung.

Taehyung breaks the stillness to approach her, half because he should be the one to do so, and half to refrain Yumi from running her mouth about whatever may have ignited her curiosity. He halts in

front of her and says “What I told you on the island still stands regardless of you joining us to Kaiya. Is that clear?”

Yumi makes a wonky ‘Okay’ sign with the hand Taehyung had blown two fingers off. “Crystal. I have a question.”

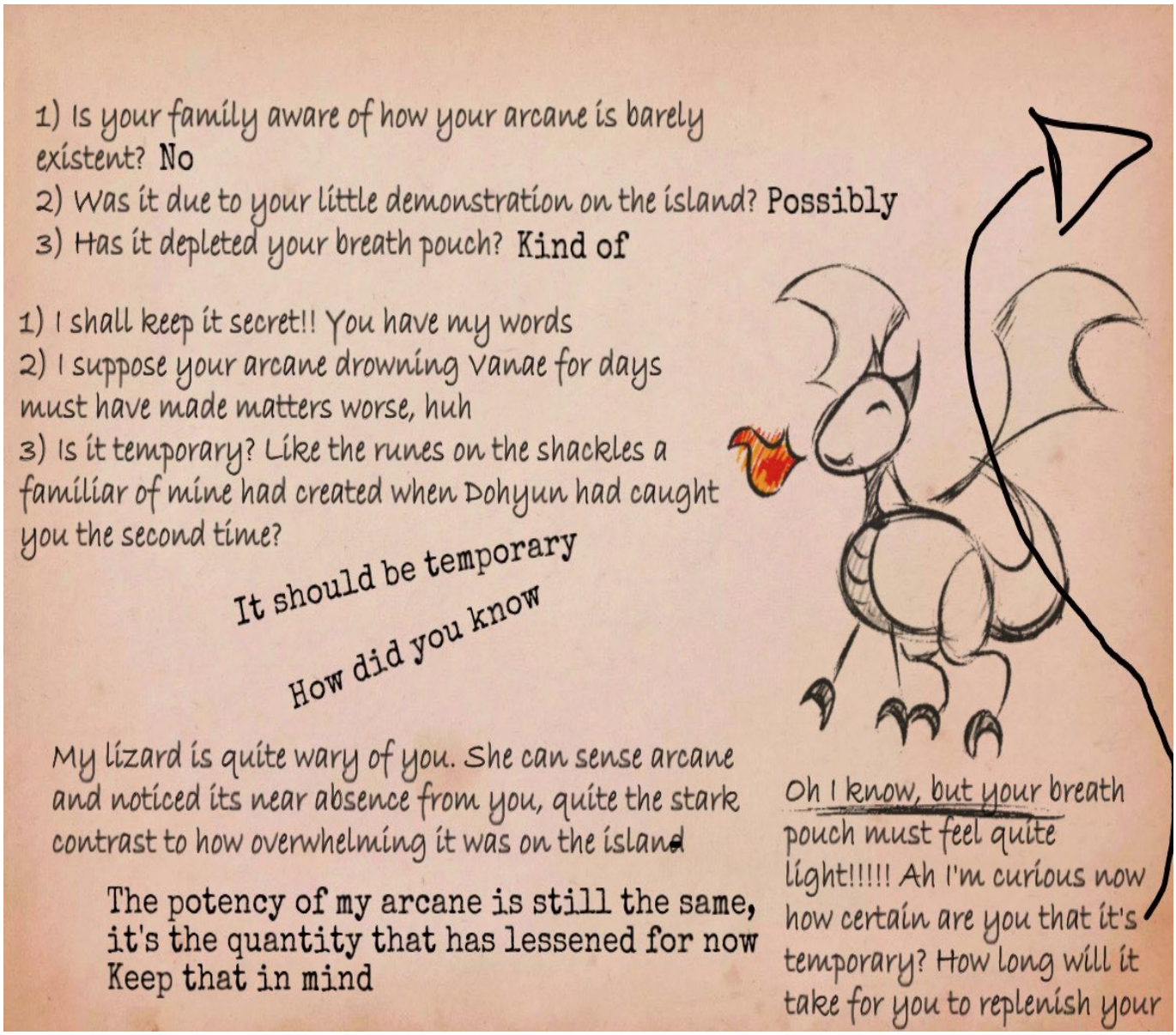
“Speak.”

“Ah, one second.” Yumi takes out a pouch that she retrieves a charcoal pencil from. She also grabs a piece of parchment and she lifts it to her face to scribble on it. She hands the paper to Taehyung a moment later.

Taehyung snatches it. His eye twitches when he sees a dragon doodled on one side of the paper. Then, he properly reads what she has written. He represses a sound of surprise as his gaze snaps on her. “How.”

Yumi points to her forehead. “My third eye.”

Taehyung gnaws on the inside of his cheek. He ignores the onlookers’ curiosity to take her pencil and write down his response.


1) Is your family aware of how your arcane is barely existent? No
2) Was it due to your little demonstration on the island? Possibly
3) Has it depleted your breath pouch? Kind of
1) I shall keep it secret!! You have my words
2) I suppose your arcane drowning Vanae for days must have made matters worse, huh
3) Is it temporary? Like the runes on the shackles a familiar of mine had created when Dohyun had caught you the second time?
It should be temporary
How did you know
My lizard is quite wary of you. She can sense arcane and noticed its near absence from you, quite the stark contrast to how overwhelming it was on the island
The potency of my arcane is still the same, it's the quantity that has lessened for now
Keep that in mind
Oh I know, but your breath pouch must feel quite light!!!!! Ah I'm curious now how certain are you that it's temporary? How long will it take for you to replenish your

Taehyung flips the paper to read the barrage of additional questions. He promptly burns the paper and swivels around. “Is everyone ready?”

“What the hell was that about?” Jimin says.

“Nothing that concerns you.” Taehyung dodges the small fireball thrown his way.

“I don’t like her being here.”

“Me either, but we made a deal.” Taehyung peers at Jungkook who’s staring at Yumi. “Let’s see what happens. We aren’t responsible for anything she does in Kaiya.”

“Everyone may enter the carriage,” Elder Miseon declares. “As you had been previously informed, I will be the one to fly us to Kaiya’s entrance through my sonic boom. Otherwise the trip would last for days.”

Taehyung is the first to step inside the carriage.

It's spacious enough to comfortably accommodate the entire group. He plops down on the far end near the closed window.

The rest of the group enters one by one.

Taehyung frowns to himself when he notices how everyone avoids the free space on his right, however he relaxes when Jungkook occupies the vacant spot. His scowl comes back full force when Jimin and Woobin install themselves in front of Taehyung and Jungkook. On the plus side, Yumi has been relegated to the other end of the carriage, away from them and framed by Minsoo and Hoseok.

"There will be one stop in six hours," Elder Miseon announces, standing outside. "Afterwards, we will continue the remainder of our trip. Keep the window shut, please, and if there is anything you need, simply knock on it, and I will stop."

A chorus of agreement answers her before she closes and locks the door.

The carriage moves as it's being lifted.

Then a boom erupts in the air.

Where Taehyung expects to feel the speed at which Elder Miseon flies, only a barely noticeable sway can be felt at first that soon smooths to a steady stillness.

The carriage is silent, saved for Yumi who hums a lullaby to herself. She's scribbling or drawing on a new piece of parchment, the lizard gnawing on a hair stick. The rock familiar isn't here, and Taehyung suspects that it's flying behind them or has been attached at the top of the carriage.

Yumi's gaze lifts on Jungkook. "Aren't you excited?"

"Don't fucking talk to him," Taehyung and Yoongi both say.

"Yoongi. Taehyung," Jungkook sighs like a parent chastising two misbehaving children. "I am," he answers Yumi.

"Me too. I'm sure the energy will be great for us."

"The energy?"

"Death leaves an energy behind, so to say. Nothing arcanic, although sometimes it *can* be arcanic, even more in your case since you can touch and sense dead souls. Have you never noticed how the air feels more familiar in certain places like graveyards?" Yumi wonders, and Taehyung catches the way Jungkook nods. "I'm certain this energy will be wonderful at Kaiya. It might be even more potent than when I had visited that pit of dragon bones in Vanae."

"I've always felt something when I'd visit cemeteries."

"We find home in death, and—"

Yumi is interrupted by her lizard that jumps down from her head. It pads toward Jungkook in a little pitter-patter.

“I’ll squash it,” Taehyung warns and Revna agrees with a hiss, curled around Jungkook’s shoulders.

“Does it understand what we say?” Jungkook asks.

“Yes and no.”

Jungkook leans forward and extends a hand toward the lizard. It sniffs at his hand for a brief moment, then it climbs on his palm where it curls into a ball. Taehyung carefully observes, ready to intervene if need be.

Yumi’s watchful gaze is riveted on her familiar too, not a single blink tearing through her unnerving stupor.

“Hi.” Jungkook lifts the lizard higher up his face.

“Does it often sleep in people’s palms?”

Yumi smiles. “No.”

“Then why is it?”

Yumi shrugs. Her and Taehyung both peer at the lizard that awakens when Jungkook gently pats its head.

The lizard nudges Jungkook’s finger and rubs its snout there. Taehyung doesn’t like it. Revna doesn’t either, if the venom that coats her fangs when she hisses at the familiar is any hint.

Surprisingly enough, *Yumi* also doesn’t like it.

“Come back,” Yumi snips, timber ice cold. The lizard immediately leaps out of Jungkook’s palm to scurry toward Yumi and disappear in a fold of her kimono. Her demeanor abruptly veers back to a relaxed one as she smiles at the rest of the room before resuming her doodling.

Taehyung slumps down his seat and leans against the window. He peers outside at the scenery that whirs past them.

His gaze flickers on Woobin.

Woobin steals a look at Jungkook, then one more. Woobin’s eyes trace down the tight-fitting pants and pullover Jungkook has put on, the latter having temporarily discarded the protective jacket.

Annoyance flashes within Taehyung.

He discards it at first, however he doesn’t resist the urge for very long, half to spite Woobin, half to feel Jungkook’s closeness.

Taehyung unfolds an arm to place his hand on Jungkook’s knee and pull it against his own. It’s when his palm slides higher up Jungkook’s thigh to cup the inner side that Woobin looks at Taehyung.

Taehyung internally gloats when Woobin averts his gaze.

“Not jealous?” Jungkook whispers in his ear.

“Nope.” After all, Taehyung does not have any reason to be. Woobin is just an annoying weasel Taehyung enjoys poking at.

Jungkook hugs Taehyung’s arm to his chest, muffling his laughter on the shoulder that he leans his head against. “Gonna blame this on your dragon too?”

“Who else?” Taehyung pinches Jungkook when the latter snorts.

“I want to nest so badly,” Jimin loudly sighs all of a sudden.

“Oh it’s been quite a while since I’ve nested too,” Dahee pipes in.

Taehyung peers at his mother. He grows confused when, after meeting his father’s gaze, Junhyun shakes his head.

Namjoon raises a hand. “What’s a nest?”

“It’s a really, really, *really* private dragonborn custom,” Jimin explains. “We don’t let anyone in our nests aside from very specific people. Emphasize on 'very' and 'specific'.”

“Is this the thing you were in one day?” Yoongi wonders.

Jimin smiles. “Yes.”

Woobin surveys his brother. “You nest?”

“Yeah.”

“Father always forbade us to.”

“Because anything that would bring us happiness or comfort was never allowed,” Jimin derides. Woobin’s gaze drops. “But you can nest at the house. It’s really nice, and it’s important to do so if you want to be in tune with your dragon.”

“I see.”

“Say, Taehyung,” Jimin starts, and Taehyung bristles when he catches onto the devious intonation, “when was the last time you nested?”

Taehyung shrugs the shoulder that isn’t occupied by Jungkook. “I'm pretty sure I never nested.”

“What?” Jungkook looks up at him. “But Jimin told me the hoard was a nest.”

“*Hah?* No!” Taehyung glares at a cackling Jimin. “I did *not* nest.”

“Just like you didn’t buy me li—” Taehyung smacks a hand over Jungkook’s blabbering mouth. A tongue licks his palm and he snatches it away to glower at Jungkook. “Don’t act disgusted. You’ve kissed that mouth before.”

“Out of duty.” Taehyung wipes his hand.

“How often do dragonborns usually nest?”

“At least once a week for most of us,” Junhyun answers. “Some do so more, others less.”

“I’ve never seen you nest aside from that one time,” Jungkook says to Taehyung.

“Because I don’t nest. I didn’t.”

“You made a cocoon of blankets and of your most precious things, aka geodes, gems, and most importantly: Jungkook,” Jimin counters. “You nested.”

Taehyung opens and closes his mouth a few times. A blush colors Jungkook’s cheeks and one heats up Taehyung’s in reaction. “That wasn’t— That wasn't nesting?” He peers at his mother, lost. “It wasn’t?”

“It was, Son, and there is no shame in it. Nesting is wonderful. Humans should adopt this practice,” Dahee smiles.

But Taehyung doesn’t nest. Ever. Plus—

“Jungkook was in the hoard,” Taehyung argues. “So it couldn’t have been a nest.”

“No need to make it sound so insulting,” Jungkook huffs.

“I wouldn’t have let you or anyone else in my nest if it had been one. My dragon wouldn’t have.”

“Yet you did. Both of you,” Jimin retorts.

It doesn’t make any sense though.

Why would he have dragged Jungkook in it? Nests are too intimate to be shared willy-nilly with anyone, even more in Taehyung’s case who never indulges his dragon counterpart.

He and Jungkook are close, but not like this, right? Taehyung can’t even fathom the idea of letting his parents or Jimin in his nest, his own *family,* yet according to them, he had been fine with having Jungkook in it?

“Is the thought of you having made a nest that bad?” Jungkook asks and there’s an upset in it that Taehyung urges himself to soothe.

“It’s not bad. Just foreign.”

Jungkook props his chin on Taehyung’s shoulder. “Then why is me being in it so impossible?”

Taehyung kneads Jungkook’s thigh as he mulls over his answer. “Because it’s intimate.” And confusing.

Jungkook hums, pressing himself close to Taehyung while the discussion carries on around them. “The bathing was intimate,” he whispers. “And you put things that are precious to you in that nest. It only makes sense for me to be in too, don’t you agree?”

Taehyung’s thoughts flicker back to the gift hanging in the solarium, the one he had finally completed and given to Jungkook.

He thinks of Jungkook’s reaction to it, the uncertainty and then coy happiness, and he says “I guess so.”

Jungkook makes a soft sound and nuzzles Taehyung's arm. "Maybe one day we could nest together."

Minsoo chokes on his water while Hoseok, Seokjin and Jimin guffaw.

Taehyung freezes on his spot before jerking away from Jungkook. "The hell is wrong with you."

"What?"

"That's— By the Elders. You can't just say that. We're married. *Political.* We're not— I'm not— Fucking hell."

"I just said we could nest together! What's so—"

Gasps, snorts and giggles erupt in the carriage at Jungkook's exclamation.

"Shut up. Shut. Up," Taehyung mutters, refusing to meet any dragonborn's eyes in the room. "Asking this is like… Just don't say that."

"It's like asking for sex," Jimin cackles. "Oh you poor, ignorant soul."

"Shut the fuck up," Taehyung snips then punches Jimin's laughing chest.

"Oh I— I didn't know! I obviously didn't mean anything by that," Jungkook mumbles. "I just meant that Taehyung and I could make a nest together. As in— Not like that. Just. You know. A platonic nest."

"By the Elders." Taehyung grumbles.

"Jungkook, my dear," Dahee playfully sighs, "I do not wish to know what you are up to with my son."

"Oh my God," Jungkook laments and hides his face against Taehyung.

"I'm sleeping," Taehyung mumbles under his breath. He folds an arm against the edge of the window to bury his heated face in the crook of his elbow, hoping to be either forgotten or swallowed by the darkness.

He feels Jungkook's shoulder shake against his own, and Taehyung says nothing when Jungkook loosely interlaces their fingers together.

It takes a moment for the effusion to die down and be diverted toward another gossiping subject — mainly Hoseok's frequent visits to Hyuna's brothel.

What surprises Taehyung as the hours elapse, is how Jungkook has been engaging with Minsoo in a discussion regarding Amaris' botany. Taehyung watches how his grandfather looks progressively more impressed by Jungkook's knowledge. Minsoo is evidently warming up to Jungkook, even going as far as asking a few — albeit grunted — questions.

Taehyung can't stop the smile that floats on his lips.

Jungkook dips his face in Taehyung's neck at some point, burying a yawn there. "Arcane kiss?"

Taehyung taps his mouth then the back of Jungkook's hand with flickering lightning. Jungkook smiles, giving one of his own arcane kisses to Taehyung.

Taehyung is still tired and sleepy, and so after making himself more comfortable and pulling Jungkook a tad closer, he closes his eyes, falling asleep to Jungkook's slow breath on his neck.

The group stretches themselves after six hours of flight as they step out of the carriage, arriving inside the forest.

They soon take out some food and beverages, others preparing a small bonfire to cook what will be their belated lunch.

It's as though an elastic band has been drawn between Taehyung and Jungkook. It pulls them near each other as Taehyung's gaze drifts on the Prince, and he reduces the distance between them, up until he can sprawl a palm on Jungkook's lower back, pleased when Jungkook reflexively tucks himself closer. "Have you eaten something?"

"Not yet."

"You don't feel like eating?" Taehyung worries.

"I'm starving, but I was waiting for you to grab me something," Jungkook answers with a cheeky smile.

Taehyung glowers to conceal his amusement. "You can do it on your own."

"It turns out the food tastes better when you're the one to cook and bring it to me. Odd, isn't it?"

"You're so fucking spoiled."

"And I wonder why."

Taehyung zaps Jungkook before making his way to where the meal is being prepared further away from the group. He crouches next to Jimin and begins to cut pieces of the griffin meat and vegetables inside a large plate.

"So," Jimin says after a while.

"Hm?"

"About the makeup on Jungkook's neck."

Taehyung emits a long, drawn out groan. His head ducks low, elbows propped on his knees. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I was possessed," he starts, his voice low enough to not be heard by anyone else. "He just smelled so good, and—"

"What's this?" Hoseok joins them, followed by Seokjin. "What are we talking about? I want in."

“Why did you have to make yourself known? We could have eavesdropped from afar,” Seokjin laments and sits across Taehyung.

Taehyung stares at them. “Leave?”

“I’m pretty sure Taehyung gave hickeys to Jungkook,” Jimin snitches.

“Yeah. Alright.” Taehyung rises to his feet. He’s yanked back down by Jimin and he considers fighting off the grip, however when it comes to raw strength, Jimin’s overpasses Taehyung’s. “I’m not talking about this with you three.”

“So did you and Jungkook…” Hoseok trails off with a wiggle of his brow. “Nest together?”

“No!” Taehyung shouts and when heads turn toward him, he hisses “ *No.* We’re married. Out of duty. Not dating.”

Seokjin and Hoseok level Taehyung with a deadpan look. “Ah,” they both say in unison.

Jimin jabs a thumb in Taehyung’s direction. “You see what I’m dealing with?”

“Because my dragon— That wasn’t me,” Taehyung retorts. “I couldn’t stop. It’s not my fault if there’s something addictive in his scent. He smells fucking divine to my dragon.” *And me*, he does not say out loud.

“But it’s not just about his scent,” Seokjin says. “I’ve never seen you close to someone like this.”

“Which is exactly why I want to know more,” Hoseok snickers and munches on a piece of dried griffin. “Hyuna’s been asking about you both.”

“Why don’t we talk about Hyuna instead, huh? You've been awfully close to her. What’s that about?” Taehyung counters to a now coughing Hoseok.

“Nothing,” Hoseok says after clearing his throat. “Just hanging out and about. Helping her with stuff. The usual routine from the past 15 years.”

“Ehh,” Jimin croons, a hand over his mouth. “Is our Hoseok nursing a crush on our fairy Hyuna?”

“Our Hoseok wants to gossip about Taehyung rather than being gossiped about,” Hoseok snips and smacks away the finger Jimin points at him. “So what? You mauled his neck. Nothing unusual for dragonborns. Did you like it?”

Taehyung shrugs. “It’s confusing.”

“I did tell you sexuality can be a fluid thing,” Jimin says. “You can develop new things with the right person.”

“What does that have to do with Jungkook?” Taehyung frowns.

Jimin’s smile is crooked when he peers at Taehyung, the muscles of his jaw shifting beneath his skin. “My bad.”

“Right. I’m just happy he’s back. Really happy,” Taehyung quietly confesses. “I didn’t realize how much I… How important he has become to me.”

“Dahee always says she can live without Junhyun but doesn’t want to,” Jimin begins. “Do you feel the same?”

Hoseok barks out a laugh. “You say this like he didn’t nearly die from heartbreak when Jungkook was gone.”

“I wasn’t dying because of this,” Taehyung snaps, his temper flaring up. “At all.”

Jimin snorts. “Sure thing.”

Taehyung’s lips press into a thin line as he stares at the ground without seeing anything. “I wasn’t.”

Jimin’s levity disappears. “Taehyung, you—” He pauses and peers at Hoseok.

“Minsoo didn't tell you anything?” Seokjin wonders.

“About what? After I asked you guys to leave that day, I stayed with Jungkook the whole time. We didn’t leave the house until today,” Taehyung explains.

“Minsoo told us you genuinely crossed paths with death when you lost your wedding ring," Jimin declares, who has never been known to beat around the bush, "and that something… dire could have happened, if he hadn’t been there.”

Had it been that bad?

The days of Jungkook’s abduction had blurred into one constant heartache that Taehyung had not been able to extricate himself from. However, going as far as saying that he had gone through a so-called ‘heartbreak syndrome’ is absolute nonsense.

Taehyung opts to deflect away from the way his heart speeds up in his chest, his palms clammy. “Were you feeling like this with someone else? Or with Yeonho?”

Jimin hums for a moment. “Not really. With Yeonho, it was manipulative and one-sided. He'd made me dependent on him, purposefully so. I’d feel like dying whenever he'd be away from me for too long and he was nurturing that dependency. It was nothing like what you and Jungkook have.”

“This piece of shit,” Hoseok sneers, planting the tip of his knife in the soil. “I’m still mad Taehyung didn’t take me with him to send Yeonho off.”

“Maybe he’ll show his face again one day, and then you’ll have your chance,” Jimin chuckles. His gaze meets Taehyung's. “How you feel is normal, especially for dragonborns. You know we can’t handle heartbreaks at all.”

“Are there different kinds of heartbreaks?” Taehyung asks, because otherwise none of this makes sense. Jungkook isn't to Taehyung what Yeonho was to Jimin.

“You would have reacted differently if someone else had been taken away,” Seokjin says to Taehyung, and it doesn’t sound like a question Taehyung even tries to deny.

“Isn’t that fucking revolting? To think of how less heartbreaking it would have been to lose either of you? That shouldn't be—" Taehyung cards a hand through his hair. "That's not how it should be. It doesn't make any sense."

“It will eventually,” Jimin assures.

Taehyung grits his teeth together. “I don’t know what he is to me.” His gaze flits on the back of Jungkook’s head before looking away. The intangible elastic band between them quivers. “I want him close to me, I like it. I enjoy spending time with him, doing things with him no matter what it is. And he’s… He’s nice to touch and be touched by? It sounds weird but I— I didn’t know I could experience this after the man with the scent. I didn’t know it could feel good to be touched. That it could feel safe.”

“Taehyung…” Jimin cups the back of his hand. “Enjoy it peacefully. It’s nice to do so, isn’t it?”

Taehyung gratefully takes the lifeline Jimin throws at him, probably sensing the way Taehyung wants to clam up. “Have you been doing so with Yoongi?”

“Oooh, I’ve seen you both rubbing elbows a lot lately,” Hoseok chirps. “Newly found lovebirds.”

“We’re taking it slow... He’s been staying at my house every now and then so we can work together,” Jimin says, his head ducked low. “It feels really nice to have a man show interest in me. A genuine one, not something with an ulterior motive. He asks about my days, my work, things like these. He even brought me a bag of gold when I mentioned being low on it one day. Yeonho wouldn’t— He wouldn’t have cared. He would have blamed me for being air headed.”

“Yoongi’s taking care of you?” Taehyung inquires.

“He is,” Jimin says with a shy smile, fiddling with the bracelets on his wrist. “I’m still wary, and scared, but he’s patient with me. So patient… Yeonho was nothing like that.”

“Because that fucking bastard used you,” Taehyung spits. “Should have had this asshole’s head roll on the ground. Beating his ass wasn’t enough.”

Jimin laughs. “I’ve learned my lesson. I don’t know if I’ll ever see anyone as a mate after how it had been with Yeonho, but you never know, I suppose.”

“What is even a mate?” Taehyung grumbles and tosses the pieces of meat in a bowl.

“A lover?” Jimin answers, a *‘You dumbass?’* not said but heard loud and clear.

“I know that. I meant how do you know you see someone as a mate? It’s different from a lover for us.”

“It’s this sense of being able to be yourself with someone. Completely. It’s mutual understanding, patience and attachment,” Jimin answers. “You want to build something with them.”

“Physicality can be part of it too,” Seokjin carries on. “The wish to kiss, hug and touch someone in ways you don’t experience for another person.”

“Yeah, exclusivity.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. I'm wondering what a mate is for us *dragonborns.* As in—” Taehyung clicks his tongue, frustrated that the words don’t come out how he wants them to. “We have our human self and our dragon self. Do they both see a mate the same way?”

“To my human self, it’s a bit complicated to describe, but a mate would be someone I can be myself with without any fear or worry,” Jimin muses.

“For me it’d be someone I cherish and wish to spoil?” Seokjin says.

Gazes drift on Hoseok who scowls. “Don’t look at me like that. I don’t know.”

Jimin mouths Hyuna’s name and Taehyung emits an amused huffs at Hoseok’s coloring face.

“And how is it for your dragon?”

“Now that you ask this, it does feel different,” Seokjin says and peers at Jimin who nods. “I suppose it’s more primal and raw? It’s more simple. For my human self, I could write pages about it, while for my dragon I’d only write a few concise words.” He hums. “A mate to my dragon would be someone to protect, which I assume is quite a common feeling for us.”

“With Yeonho, the way my dragon was feeling with him at first was safety and loyalty. It also highly exacerbated my draconic instincts, like my urge to nest, scent, mark him or be marked by him and more.”

“It’s something you can want with a friend or family,” Taehyung says.

“Not to the extent you would for a mate.”

“Dragonborns scent each other. We’ve scented in the past,” Taehyung retorts.

“Do you want to make me yours?” Jimin counters.

Taehyung’s nose curls in distaste. “Don’t be disgusting.”

“Why does it sound disgusting to you?”

Taehyung shrugs.

“Because it’s something you do with your mate, because it's fucking intimate, you damn fool,” Hoseok provides. “You dragon feeling like this with Jungkook can mean that—”

“I don’t want it to mean anything because he’s not my mate. I don’t want one,” Taehyung snaps. “But my dragon is— It’s fucking *obsessed* with Jungkook. It wants to scent him, it’s happy when I’ve made him mine whether it be through scenting, lending him my clothes, or anything else. And it makes my arcane fucking purr.” Hoseok and Jimin snort, which only serves to worsen Taehyung’s growing ire. “I don’t know how to put it back in its cage when it doesn't want to be.”

“What happened to just enjoying it with Jungkook?”

“It was expunged when my dragon had me do all of that with Jungkook,” Taehyung answers. “Why has it been behaving like this? And how do I stop it?"

“I think that’s something you have to figure out in time,” Jimin says. “You’ll reject anything we may explain.”

Taehyung swallows the unjustified jab prickling at the tip of his tongue. He tosses his knife on the ground as he rises on his feet. He turns but he doesn’t get to draw a step before Hoseok speaks.

“Your dragon is starting to see Jungkook as a mate.”

“Hoseok!”

Taehyung’s head swivels around, his glower boring through Hoseok. “*Huh?* ”

Hoseok stands as well, hands in his pockets. “Everything points toward this, doesn’t it?”

“Nothing does.”

“I can make a list if you want.” Hoseok walks up to Taehyung, halting in front of him. “You allow him in your nest. You scent him. You give him your clothes. Hell, you nearly died of heartbreak when he was taken away from you. What the fuck else do you think your dragon sees him as?”

“He is *not* my mate, and my dragon—”

“Is beginning to consider him as one,” Hoseok interjects. “Your arcane too, if the way it riddled the sky for days is any hint.”

“You know nothing. Jungkook is not my mate.”

Byunghun peers up at the darkened sky, the storm's downpour incessant as it rattles against the glass dome. “Is your arcane aware of it?”

Taehyung emits a sardonic scoff. “I care about him but not like that.”

“You can deny it all you want, but at the end of the day, *Jungkook* is the only person with whom you’re doing all of this.”

Haneul's face flashes in Taehyung's mind, a petty and vicious thought, and his mouth opens to utter a retort but Hoseok precedes him.

“And if you’re thinking of doing this with someone else just to contradict me, you’re proving my point.”

“I can’t even fathom the idea of falling in love, let alone have a mate. I’m not capable of loving like this." The man with the scent had made sure of it. "I don't know what Jungkook is to me, but my dragon can’t see someone as a mate because *I* never will.”

“Mating isn’t always romantic,” Seokjin starts. “There have been close friends that—”

“Oh, please,” Hoseok scoffs. “Let's be honest for one fucking second. We both know how—”

“It’s true though,” Jimin says and smacks Hoseok’s arm. “It’s very rare, but it can happen when they have a strong bond.”

“What we want to say is that however your dragon feels toward Jungkook is alright.”

“It’s not. My heritage shouldn’t even be free to begin with. All my chaos ever did was cause me trouble and nearly have me killed for simply existing,” Taehyung says with a mirthless chuckle. “Yet you’re telling me that the second it’s free from its cage, it’s seeing someone I’ve known for a few months as a mate? That doesn’t make *any* fucking sense.”

"It does, but you're refusing to accept it," Hoseok replies.

Taehyung’s hands ball up into fists, his breaths clashing together in his pouch. “I’m done with this.”

“Why is it such a big deal?” Hoseok continues as Taehyung turns away.

“Fuck off."

“Why do you act as though it’s the end of the world if your dragon—”

“Because it’s terrifying!” Taehyung shouts and he’s too loud, the others will hear him.

Jungkook will.

“It makes me so *vulnerable.* My own dragon is foreign and unknown to me, and I can’t just accept its sudden presence. I never learned how to,” Taehyung rasps, a lump swelling in his throat. “I've never nested in my life but suddenly I am with Jungkook? I don't do intimacy or affection or any of that but I do with Jungkook? My chaos has never known peace *once* in its life, yet finds it within Jungkook now? Why?”

“Taehyung...” It’s Dahee, but Taehyung ignores her.

“And if half of me is alien to myself, why would Jungkook want to keep *that* by his side? Why would he want stay? He doesn't need this kind of mess in his life, right now or ever." Jungkook deserves better than this. "If I can't even understand myself, then what worth am I to him? What can I give him beside nothing? Beside *everything* that is chaos and hideous and undeserving of his l — Of his—” Taehyung presses the back of his hand against his trembling lips, feeling sick and unable to finish. "He'll have every right to leave and not care anymore. He shouldn't have to deal with my chaos. Not after everything he's been through his whole life. I—”

I don't want to lose him.

Taehyung can’t say this, the words dying on his tongue and he’s so cold so he tries to summon his fire but when he tries to, nothing occurs. His head lowers as he lifts a hand to his mouth, hiding its tremble.

“Taehyung, what’s going on?”

Taehyung blinks the prickling in his eyes. He meets Minsoo’s gaze but looks away seconds later.

“Son—”

“M’fine,” Taehyung croaks and pivots away from his mother.

Jungkook is standing behind him, a few feet away, his scent sour.

And so simple yet complex, so confusing yet natural, everything is a little better.

Taehyung can breathe easier.

Why does seeing Jungkook alleviate Taehyung's upset? Why does he want to hug him? Why is everyone frustrating him except Jungkook?

Everything in Taehyung feels like a raw, barren nerve that Jungkook could so easily sunder if he desired to. Allowing Jungkook in had been worth it and so, *so good,* however the closer he grows to Jungkook, the scarier it becomes. Because Taehyung is…

He's chaos, in so many different ways that no one can deal with. Maybe the man with the scent had been right when he had said that Taehyung and his chaos can't be loved the way the man does. Maybe letting Jungkook in had been a mistake, one that is too late to erase now.

Taehyung doesn't want to lose Jungkook, whether it be to death or anything else.

"Taehyung?" Jungkook says, now a foot away from him.

"Storm."

Jungkook promptly gets into action, a cold ire settling over his face. His gaze darts toward the onlookers before he grabs Taehyung by the arm and leads him to the carriage that they enter. "I'll be right back."

Taehyung sits down on his previous spot. He wipes his eyes and clears his throat, then dries his sweaty hands on the fabric of his pants. His heart feels heavy, and it only lightens when Jungkook joins him again, closing the door behind him.

"I took most of the already cooked meat. And also some rice," Jungkook announces.

Taehyung peers at him. "I'm surprised they let you."

"I didn't give them any choice," Jungkook grins and plops down next to Taehyung, handing him a plate. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"They pushed too much, that's all."

"I can scold them if you want. I'm good at it."

Taehyung huffs a genuine chuckle. "That I certainly know."

They eat in silence, the forest quiet around them and Taehyung suspects that Jungkook has asked the group to feast on their fare farther away from the carriage. Taehyung wolfs down his meal, more than he would usually eat.

"You're alright?" Taehyung asks once they're done and places his plate above Jungkook's in the seats facing them.

"I am."

"If you're bothered by Yumi's presence, just say the word and I'll send her away."

"Would you really?"

“Of course,” Taehyung says, a little peeved that Jungkook would even question it.

Jungkook smiles as though he had known the answer already, and he probably had. “I’m still surprised that someone other than Namjoon and Yoongi can be loyal to me like this. It’s different with you, but in the best way possible.”

Taehyung crosses his arms over his chest. “Isn't it scary?”

“That you’re different to me?” Jungkook says, because of course he understands what Taehyung means even with a few words.

“Yeah.”

“No, not at all.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s you,” Jungkook simply says, as if it makes any sense.

“I don’t understand.”

“I trust you. I feel safe with you, Taehyung. Do you?”

“I do.”

“But?”

Taehyung finds Jungkook’s searching gaze. “I don’t like feeling vulnerable.”

“You feel like this with me?”

“Yes and no,” Taehyung answers, confused by his own reply. “I— I do trust you, and feel safe with you. It’s just… There are certain things that I don’t understand, that I don’t know if I want or am capable of understanding.”

“I don’t think anyone ever fully understands themselves.” Jungkook rests a hand on Taehyung’s knee. “But if you want to, or maybe want to learn how to, then you’ve got time. There’s no need to rush yourself.”

“I suppose, yeah.”

If Jungkook notices the avoidance of an actual answer, he makes no mention of it.

“Do you want a hug?”

Jungkook quirks a brow. “Do *you* want one? Because if yes, you can just ask. It’d be nice if you do, actually.”

“It’d make you feel better about your greed?”

Jungkook softly nods. “And most importantly, It’s nice to feel wanted like this...”

“I’d like a hug.”

“From me?” Jungkook asks and while it’s playful, there’s still a yearning for reassurance that Taehyung picks up on.

“Yes. From you.”

Jungkook’s smile grows to a grin. “I’m gonna straddle you.”

“Wh—”

Jungkook is on Taehyung’s lap before the latter can finish his sentence. Jungkook folds his knees to frame Taehyung’s legs and he wraps his arms around Taehyung’s neck, their chests pressed flush. He emits a content sigh. “Much better.”

It is.

“Thank you.” Taehyung embraces Jungkook’s waist, pulling him closer, oddly comforted by Jungkook’s warm weight. “Are you sure you’re fine?”

Jungkook is quiet for a moment. “I’m nervous about Kaiya.” He leans back, fiddling with the collar of Taehyung’s shirt. “It feels like a lot is indirectly on my shoulders since I’m a necromancer. Kaiya, the plague, finding a cure. Then there’s Seohyung too.” A strand of hair tickles his eye and he tries to blow it away, however it falls back down.

Taehyung tucks the strand behind Jungkook’s ear. “We’ll find solutions for everything, whether or not you can or want to help. If it gets too much, you tell me. You won’t ever have to explain yourself. You can just say ‘storm’ and I’ll be there to stop everything, yes?”

Jungkook makes a soft, happy sound. “Okay, I will.”

“You don’t have to handle it all on your own anymore, and you shouldn’t. You can rely on me.”

Taehyung’s thumb grazes past Jungkook’s cheek before he can stop himself, and Jungkook catches the wrist to nuzzle the palm when Taehyung is about to withdraw.

“Wait.” Jungkook pushes himself away. He takes one of the blankets then makes his way back. However this time he settles sideways between Taehyung’s legs, his own bent and thrown over one of Taehyung's. “Even better.” He yawns, dropping his head on Taehyung’s shoulder as he slumps against him.

“Comfortable?” Taehyung chuckles.

“The most. You?”

Taehyung curls an arm around Jungkook’s back, the other draped over the navel. “Me too.”

Jungkook’s breathing slows down, and he falls asleep within minutes, his breath warm and puffing on Taehyung’s neck where his face is buried.

Why is holding Jungkook like this so soothing?

Taehyung himself might fall asleep at this rate.

He must have because he startles when a faint knock rattles on the window a while later. Taehyung looks up from where he's resting his head above Jungkook’s crown.

Jimin carefully slides open the window. “We’re ready to leave.”

“You can come in.”

“I’m sorry for Hoseok.”

“It’s fine. I’ll talk to him after the trip.”

“Alright,” Jimin smiles and glances at Jungkook. “You both look comfy.”

Taehyung makes a small nod before propping his chin atop Jungkook’s head again.

Everyone quietly enters the carriage and finds their spot.

Taehyung ignores them in favor of holding Jungkook tighter under the blanket. He feels exposed anew, like he shouldn’t be displaying this kind of closeness in front of everyone else, however he attempts to push aside the feeling.

Everything’s fine, he tells himself.

“Is he asleep?” Yoongi wonders.

“Yes,” Jungkook says, eliciting a series of laughter.

A chit-chat begins, still kept somewhat hushed.

Taehyung peers at the warm weight in his arms. Jungkook’s hair is pushed back, his sleepy face scrunching when a loud cackle erupts on the other side of the carriage.

It’s stupid how Taehyung has half a mind to tell everyone to vacate the place so that Jungkook can peacefully sleep.

Jungkook holds Taehyung’s free hand and lifts it from his navel to play with the fingers. His thumb brushes each nail, halting on the wedding ring that he rolls. Taehyung can see Jungkook’s own wedding ring where the storm inside the diamond flickers in minuscule lightning. Unlike how he’d usually clad himself in plethora of jewelry, Jungkook hasn’t put on any other necklace, earrings or rings aside from those given by Taehyung. Taehyung wonders if it was a conscious decision from Jungkook.

“I missed you,” Jungkook murmurs, only for Taehyung to hear.

It takes some time, but Taehyung manages to spell an *‘I missed you too’* with his lightning, feeling too coy and bare to say it out loud. Jungkook’s shoulders shake, his cheeks bunched up.

Some kind of itch flutters in Taehyung’s chest, scratched ever so softly by every back and forth of Jungkook's thumbs. Taehyung watches with mute surprise how a tide of goosebumps raises, however not on Jungkook's skin unlike it usually does, but rather on Taehyung's.

He has been caressed or gently held by Jungkook before, but he has never taken the time to revel in how good it really feels, in how Jungkook's touch soothes the demons of Taehyung's past and the

uncomfortable crawling on his skin.

Jungkook turns Taehyung's hand so that the palm faces upward. He traces the lines and wrinkles there, nurturing the incessant shudder pebbling Taehyung's arm.

"Do you like it?"

Taehyung doesn't answer right away. Instead he allows his fingers to graze past Jungkook's, gorging onto the contact. "Yes," he eventually murmurs.

"Me too."

"They're…"

"Yup," Jimin says, peering at Taehyung and Jungkook.

Jungkook is playing with Taehyung's hand, looking all cozy and comfortable from where he's cocooned across Taehyung's lap. Jungkook appears unaware of the way Taehyung's gaze hasn't strayed away from him.

Jimin looks away, feeling like he's intruding on something he shouldn't be witnessing.

He has never seen Taehyung look at someone with such evident adoration, tamed yet intense, soft yet dedicated. Taehyung's attention is wholeheartedly given to Jungkook, even if he seems to be blind to all of this.

"What happened to him earlier?" Yoongi quietly wonders.

"Feelings and something else that I don't know yet. And also your daily dose of emotional constipation."

"Makes sense that you, of all people, have caught onto that."

"Hey!" Jimin lightly smacks Yoongi's knee. He leaves it there, a test both to himself and the warlock. He thinks about removing it, however he finds some bravery in the way Taehyung and Jungkook are unabashedly basking in each other's presence without a care in the world.

Jimin has missed this: being physically close to someone that falls in the friend category, yet could become more than that. He'd ask for more if he wasn't already so self-conscious of a palm on a knee.

It's a little better when Yoongi links their pinky together.

"Do they even realize?" Yoongi continues.

"Taehyung? Not at all," Jimin chuckles, grateful for the distraction. "But maybe Jungkook does?"

"Maybe. Although he can be quite blind himself."

“They’re certainly both idiots,” Jimin says, fully aware of how hypocritical he is when a simple hand to knee touch has his heart beating fast, his palms sweating.

“One more than the other,” Yoongi says with a well aimed look at Taehyung.

Jimin bursts into laughter. “That I can’t deny.”

Yoongi peers at Jimin as he laughs too. He’s so cute with his gummy smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“You’re cute,” Jimin blurts out.

Yoongi averts his gaze. "Shut up."

"After Kaiya…" Jimin trails off for a while. "There's some place I'd like to show you."

"A place?"

"A cave."

"Is it the same one Taehyung took Jungkook to?"

"No, it's another cave system. There's a lot of ore and minerals there, it's beautiful."

"I'd love to go as long as we don't have to walk around for too long," Yoongi quips and Jimin laughs.

"I'll fly us there. I could carry you in my talon or bridal style, depending on what you prefer."

Yoongi playfully glares at Jimin. He pulls open his book and after taking out a quill, he begins to sketch the two lovebirds living in their cocoon at the far end of the carriage.

Jungkook is fast asleep now. Taehyung has his cheek pressed atop Jungkook's crown, his lids lazily blinking, and Jimin isn't surprised when Taehyung also succumbs to Morpheus' slumber minutes later.

Jimin hesitates for a while.

It happens in baby steps, first by slumping lower in his seat. Afterwards he discreetly shuffles closer to Yoongi, up until their arms and thighs touch. Then, and as tentatively as a newborn hatchling learning how to fly, Jimin rests his head on Yoongi’s shoulder.

It’s comfortable at first.

However it promptly reminds Jimin of how similar it had been with Yeonho, how good everything had been at the beginning only to veer into a nightmare as the months had gone by.

Jimin shouldn’t be doing this.

He’s about to move away when Yoongi speaks.

“Look, Chim.” Yoongi points at the snake he has drawn in one of the pages. The snakes slithers out of the book in a trail of ink. It crawls up the seat where Revna is curled on Dahee’s lap, and Jimin

chuckles to himself when Revna swats the ink snake with her tail, the motion punctuated with a hiss.

Jimin's heart still beats too fast, but it's abated by the sleepy look Taehyung aims at him. Taehyung's eyes dart between Jimin and Yoongi, then he mouths a 'Lovebirds' that further relaxes Jimin who snorts.

"That's fucking reach coming from you," Hoseok counters, eliciting a series of laughter in the carriage as gazes drift on Jungkook who's cradled in Taehyung's arms.

"Shut the hell up," Taehyung snips and looks away.

"He has a point," Jimin says, earning himself a glare from Taehyung.

"Damn right I do."

Taehyung and Hoseok continue to — quietly — argue. Jimin doesn't budge from where he's leaning against Yoongi, his lids falling shut.

"Fucking finally." Minsoo grunts. "Hellish ride."

"It wasn't that bad?"

"Because you were busy playing husband with that necromancer of yours."

"I was not— I was *not*."

"Whatever you say, kid," Minsoo says and walks off.

The group exits the carriage one after another.

"Oh wow," Namjoon exclaims.

"This isn't quite what I was expecting," Dahee says. "I was anticipating more red."

Elder Miseon chuckles. "You will see."

"Oh my God."

Taehyung fully steps out of the carriage with Jungkook, a hand placed on the latter's nape as they climb down the couple stairs. He surveys the view before him.

There isn't much to say about it, yet it is gorgeous nonetheless.

A sea of white flowers stretches endlessly, the field all that Taehyung can see down the horizon. Not a single tree, bush or other kind of vegetation is visible, and the flowers are high, the stems reaching his thighs. They haven't bloomed yet.

What strikes Taehyung the most is the latent arcane he can sense in the area, as if waiting to awaken. It's welcoming, for lack of a better word. It pulls Taehyung's breaths out of his pouch, and it's as though the field is playing a melody with them, pacifying it to a floating lull as his arcane weaves between the flowers.

If the way the group as a whole takes a deep breath and evidently relaxes, he isn't the only one experiencing this.

"Spider lilies," Taehyung, Jungkook and Minsoo all say in unison. Taehyung glances at Jungkook whose tattoos pepper his skin.

"Kinda eerie," Yumi says.

"If we all could please gather around," Elder Miseon instructs, and everyone follows suit, including Jimin and Hoseok that had wandered off. "There are a few rituals you must know before entering Kaiya."

"Dangerous ones?"

"Yes," Miseon smiles. "As some of you may already be aware of, Kaiya had once been a place of harmony. Of exchange. It still is in spite of its collapse. As such, it is your duty to offer a gift to Kaiya, and to, in return, receive Kaiya's gift."

"What kind of gift are we talking about?"

"Your blood, first to enter, and then to leave. You will receive your gift before your departure."

Namjoon squeaks. "Beg your pardon?"

"You will have to bleed in this field in order to be allowed entrance within Kaiya," Elder Miseon explains. "Kaiya is its own entity. It breathes and feels. It watches and protects. It needs your blood to grant access to its core."

"Was Kaiya always like this?" Jimin wonders, but he seems distracted by Yoongi who's furiously drawing in his book.

"Kaiya has always been an arcanic place where bonds can be formed and strengthened, however never to the extent it currently is," Elder Miseon says. "The Great War has precipitated Kaiya to its downfall. The lives that have been taken, the blood that has been spilled, and the arcanes that have been used here have been… absorbed by the forest. You may see Kaiya as a living spider web, intricate and alive, with thousands upon thousands of threads all fed by a pulsating heart. It is why it can feel everything, as well as know all that is done in its midst."

"That's concerning," Hoseok mutters.

Taehyung agrees with a hum. "What about the gifts we'll receive?"

"Entering Kaiya is the easiest part. Leaving is where it will become tricky. Once inside, you must be respectful of the forest and its spirits. Most importantly, you must accept Kaiya's offering."

"What if we don't?"

“Then you will remain trapped within the forest to eventually die. Kaiya is no place for the living,” Elder Miseon bluntly says.

“We can just accept the gift. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal, Namjoon, is that Kaiya’s gifts can be nefarious, and in some cases, fatal. It is up to fate whether your gift will have a positive outcome or not,” Miseon continues. “They can vary from a candy, to an instant death, and everything in-between, yet all personal to who you are. Entering Kaiya is arduous, from beginning to end. You *will* face challenges, starting from now with how well your body will handle Kaiya’s atmosphere as a whole. If you do not wish to enter anymore, you may remain in the carriage and wait for our return.”

“Alright I’ll stay behind, then. Good luck everyone,” Namjoon says with a tight-lipped grin.

“Namjoon,” Jungkook scolds.

“What if my gift is an axe on my back! Have you thought of that?!”

“Everything will be fine. We’re a large group, and Minsoo can help us as well,” Jungkook reassures.

“There is only so much protection that can be awarded within Kaiya,” Miseon warns.

Namjoon points a hand at her. “See?”

“I’m going in,” Yoongi announces, echoed by Jimin. “I’m curious. You can’t tell me you aren’t,” he adds with a look at Namjoon.

“Of course I am,” Namjoon mumbles. “I read a lot about it lately and I *am* fascinated by it, but what if I bleed out to death once inside? I’m too young to die.”

“I did mention I could raise you,” Jungkook says.

“Stop saying that!”

“Who else is joining?”

Every hand slowly raises, all except for Namjoon who rubs his palms on his face then huffs and glares at Jungkook.

“Fine, fine.” Namjoon bats away a butterfly that flies up to his nose. “I’ll join. I don’t want to stay behind alone anyway. There would be no one to defend me.”

Hoseok snorts. “You can just use one of your gigantic books. They’re so fucking heavy you could kill someone with them. Just hit them with the corner.”

“I mean… That’s not a bad idea,” Namjoon nods to himself.

“You’re sure, Viper?” Taehyung worries. “There will be a lot of deaths there.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here, Taehyung,” Jungkook says with a patronizing tone. “I’ll be fine, and if not, I’ll tell you.”

“Yeah, you do that.”

“If everyone has agreed to enter Kaiya, please, offer your gift,” Elder Miseon starts, taking out a dagger from underneath her cloak. “However, do take your time, as it may be overwhelming for some, even more for mates.”

Without any kind of warning, and against her own advice, Elder Miseon cleanly slashes the palm of her hand.

She peers at the rest of the group and says “You may follow my lead and do as I’ve done.”

Minsoo is next as he cuts his palm, Hoseok and Seokjin mirroring him. The latter two have to cover Namjoon’s eyes for one while the other slices at Namjoon's palm. Taehyung snickers to himself when a strangled, high-pitched noise rises in Namjoon’s throat.

Jimin nips at his own hand and Yoongi does the same, the two of them peering at each other. Dahee takes care of Junhyun, while Junhyun does the same with his mate, and they kiss each other afterwards, swaying from side to side in a slow dance.

“It reminds me of when we took our vows. It feels the same,” Dahee says.

“It does,” Junhyun smiles and pecks her forehead, his wind coalescing around her waist.

Taehyung glances at Jungkook.

Jungkook is already looking at him, and Taehyung knows what Jungkook is about to ask before the words are uttered.

“Do it for me?”

Taehyung nods.

He takes Jungkook’s right hand, turning the palm upward, and he summons his wind, sharpening it. “Ready?”

“Mhm.”

Jungkook does not wince when Taehyung snips his skin. Taehyung does not either when Jungkook uses his dagger on Taehyung next, the blade smoothly cutting through. They’ve both experienced worse pain, after all.

Taehyung watches how blood pools in both of their palms. It’s pretty, in an odd, morbid way.

Jungkook must share the same thought because fascination swims in his blackened eyes. Most would find the Prince's interest in the macabre frightening, yet Taehyung can’t help but find it amusing, endeared.

Jungkook lifts his hand above Taehyung’s. Drops of blood trickle from between his fingers and dangle at the tips before falling in Taehyung’s open palm. His damp fingertips touch Taehyung’s, smearing the blood there, and they skim down, up until he reaches the cut in the skin.

It should be disgusting, the way Jungkook presses both of palm close, their blood mingling. Yet all that Taehyung can feel is a shy trance, lost in how intimate everything feels, as though a blood oath

is being taken between them, like vows that have yet to be spoken.

Taehyung's breaths that had been agitated halt, finding their peace again. Jungkook's flames aren't out, yet Taehyung swears that he can feel their presence seep within him to greet the arcane in his breath pouch. It's cold. Comforting. It's familiar and Jungkook.

"I feel a little weird," Jungkook confesses with a hushed voice.

"Me too," Taehyung answers just as quietly.

Jungkook rubs his bloody thumb along the side of Taehyung's hand, his eyes closed. The wind ruffles his hair, his honey skin and dark garment illuminated by sunlight, contrasted by the white spider lilies surrounding him. The sun doesn't shy away from basking the raven tattoos in its golden hue.

Jungkook's hand tightens around Taehyung's. "I can feel your arcane."

"How is it?"

Jungkook's eyes flutter open. They find Taehyung's as they always do. "It feels like home."

Something wavers within Taehyung. He can't really tell what it is, if it's hope or a sense of belonging that suddenly wants to exist. However it smothers the voice at the back of his head, the *'No one could love your chaos'* so many have said out loud or mutely implied through their fear and isolation.

Taehyung is tugged out of his mind by a caress, and everything narrows down to Jungkook anew.

Jungkook's blood has cooled down, but its metallic scent permeates the air, blending with the one of floral and calming grim that is carried toward Taehyung when Jungkook exhales and shuffles closer.

"I feel really close to you right now," Jungkook whispers and brushes his lips on Taehyung's cheek. "Do you feel it too?"

Taehyung nods, not trusting his voice, and unsure on what to answer.

"It's like…" Jungkook lets go to curl both hands around Taehyung's nape, uncaring of the blood he spreads there. "I'm out in the open for you."

Everything feels delicately exacerbated. *Freed.* Whether it be the cold arcane that bleeds in Taehyung, or his own that embraces Jungkook.

Goosebumps flare on Taehyung's skin as more awaken on Jungkook's. They breathe in at the same time, exhaling together. The word 'belonging' grows, seeming to exist for Jungkook solely, yet so alien.

It's frightening.

"Kiss?" Jungkook demands, ever so greedy.

Taehyung lets his own greed respond for him.

He cups Jungkook’s neck with his bloody hand because it doesn’t feel right to do so with the other. A push of his thumb on the angle of Jungkook’s jaw follows suit, and Jungkook exposes himself for Taehyung.

Taehyung allows his lightning to walk a trail on Jungkook's cheek as his lips do. His palm travels to cradle the front of Jungkook's throat where he must leave a smeared carmine imprint behind, but Jungkook hums a pleased chuckle.

There’s an untamed creature in Taehyung that ignites. It murmurs in his ears to bathe Jungkook in his blood, to make him his in another kind of way. *'Jungkook would look so breathtaking, praised by scarlet'* , the creature rumbles.

Perhaps Jungkook has his own creature whispering the same thing to him. “I want to crawl in your chest again… Want you to crawl in mine too.” He tangles his and Taehyung’s fingers together. “Can I?”

Taehyung wants to let Jungkook do as he pleases.

The creature thunders for more blood, and Taehyung can nearly hear the way Jungkook’s craves the same.

Taehyung does not budge when he feels a dagger slice down his arm. Instead, he presses his thumb on Jungkook’s unblemished palm, drawing more blood as well when his wind sharpens. He thinks he hears some noises around him, however his senses are too entranced by Jungkook, by the sound of a heartbeat that syncs with his own.

Taehyung reclines to see how more red is coating their skin.

They continue to bleed and bleed, becoming his and theirs and each other’s and—

“What the hell is wrong with you both?!”

Taehyung staggers backward when he’s yanked away from Jungkook by Jimin. He’s breathless, he realizes, dizziness clouding his mind.

Jungkook looks disoriented too as he glances around.

Wind that is not Taehyung's own billows and pools behind him. It pushes him toward Jungkook.

“What the fuck was that?” Yoongi snaps, his wary gaze fixated on Taehyung.

“I… I don’t know,” Jungkook mumbles and peers down at his wounded hands. “Uh?”

Taehyung looks down as well.

One of the flower buds has blossomed. It holds something in its core, of a deep, wine-like red.

“Is that a pomegranate?” Someone wonders.

“What is that?”

“Touch it,” Seokjin dares Hoseok.

Hoseok makes a move to touch the fruit.

Taehyung is fast, and so is Jungkook.

Hoseok finds himself at the end of a bead of force and a dagger that is swiftly pressed beneath his chin.

“Huuuh. Guys?” Hoseok's gaze darts between Taehyung and Jungkook. “It’s me. A friend, remember?”

Taehyung curses. He tries to withdraw his arcane and aim the bead away from Hoseok’s head, however he can’t because Hoseok is still reaching for the damn fruit. “Back off.”

“Wha—”

“ *Move,* ” Jungkook rasps, his timber icy.

Hoseok steps back, palms raised above his head. It’s only then that Taehyung drops his arm and shakes off the bead.

“Sorry,” Jungkook apologizes. “Don’t touch the fruit. I don’t know why I got so mad when you tried to do so.”

“Elder Miseon?” Dahee starts and surveys the woman. “Care to explain?”

“In some… unusual scenarios, Kaiya enjoys granting an entrance gift, on top of the departure gift.”

“Oh and this gift can be people killing each other?” Jimin says.

“The pomegranate is born from their blood.” Miseon peers at Taehyung and Jungkook. “A gift for you both.”

“We should eat it,” Jungkook blurts out at the same time Taehyung says “I refuse to eat it.”

Taehyung stares at Jungkook. “Are you insane?”

“When did you become so boring?” Jungkook fires back.

“We don’t know the properties of that fruit. It’s clearly arcanic, so for all we know, it could bleed us or worse. It *is* our blood. It—” Taehyung pauses. “You felt how weird it was.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Jungkook shrugs. “It’s the fruit of our blood.”

Taehyung glowers when a series of snickers elevates at the distasteful jest. “We’re taking it with us but we’re not eating yet, if ever.” Jungkook’s lips purse into an affronted pout. “No. We’re not eating it.”

Jungkook utters a saddened *‘Come on, please’* , trailed by an equally sad noise.

Taehyung caves in when Jungkook hangs onto his arm and looks up at him like a kicked hatchling. He heaves a deep sigh. He, too, is curious after all. “We'll ask the guardian if they know what the pomegranate can do, and then we’ll see.”

Jungkook grins. “Thank you!”

“Fucking Viper.”

“You’re pathetic,” Jimin tells Taehyung with a shake of his head.

Taehyung zaps him.

Taehyung is careful when he plucks out the pomegranate from the flower. He brings it to his nose and gives it a sniff. Blood. Sugar. And this blend of his and Jungkook’s scent.

Taehyung tucks the pomegranate in his satchel after smacking away Jungkook’s probing fingers. “Has this happened before?”

“I have heard of such offerings being given, however only on one occasion since Kaiya's downfall,” Miseon answers.

“It was granted to who?”

“A mated couple,” Miseon says with a glint of amusement.

Taehyung blinks a few times. He sees in the corner of his eyes the way Jungkook’s head twists around toward him. There’s a cheeky, devious grin that curls Jungkook’s lips.

“No,” Taehyung cuts off before Jungkook can speak.

“But—”

“No.”

“We’re married.”

“Not mated.”

“Still married.”

“Political.”

“Were the marks on my neck also political?”

Taehyung gawks at the low jab. “Fuck you.”

“Would that count as mating if I let you?”

“By the Elders,” Taehyung grumbles and does his best to ignore both the warmth that overtakes his face, and the cackles that erupt around him. “Is it too late to divorce.”

“Yes,” Jungkook chips.

“We are *not* eating that damn fruit yet. It’s not up for debate,” Taehyung sternly says. He surveys a huffing and puffing Jungkook that subdues at Taehyung’s stare.

“Fine."

“Perhaps we should discuss this once inside Kaiya. I would also suggest waiting before consuming the pomegranate, as the guardian will have more knowledge regarding its properties,” Elder Miseon says then beckons the group toward her. “If we are done dilly dallying, let us enter Kaiya before any of us bleeds out.”

“Where’s Revna?” Taehyung wonders.

“She’s been in the ruby. We don’t really know what to expect, so I think it’s safer for her inside,” Jungkook explains with a certain temper.

“You’re gonna sulk the whole way because I said no?”

Jungkook glances at him. “Only for the next seven minutes.”

Taehyung shakes his head with a smile.

“Now, if everyone is prepared, please extend your hand atop a flower, and allow your blood to fall on it. Those provided with arcane, infuse some of it in it as well,” Elder Miseon says, and the group does as asked.

Taehyung levels his balled up, bloody hand above one of the spider lily buds.

Elder Miseon deeply inhales and exhales. Her gaze drags across the circle the group has formed. "May winter bloom."

Nothing occurs at first. The field remains the same.

The silence grows terse at the stillness that befalls around them.

Then, a gust of pure arcane bellows through the area, powerful enough to be felt by Namjoon who staggers on his spot.

The buds that have drank their blood all begin to burgeon one by one, and soon the entire field of white buds blossoms with red spider lilies, whether it be the petals, leaves or the stems. The wind gains in strength. It snatches the petals in a carmine whirlwind that Taehyung has to shield himself from with an arm.

"Everyone hold onto each other! We are entering Kaiya," Elder Miseon shouts.

Taehyung tries to reach for Jungkook but he does not get the time to do so before he’s thrown backward to fall onto his back.

The storm of petals comes to a halt as abruptly as it had started.

“Fuck.”

“Is everyone alright?!”

“Holy shit.”

“Wow…”

“What the hell is this place?”

“Kaiya?”

“Shut up, smartass.”

Taehyung sits up and rises to his feet. He looks ahead, and he wonders if he has stepped into some kind of alternate reality.

A deep, never-ending expanse of red is all that he can see.

The leaves, grass, tree trunks, bushes. The sky itself has taken a more pastel pink hue.

All is red.

The spider lilies are gone, however he can notice some other kind of red flowers scattered across the forest. Not a single sound can be heard aside from those the group makes, but Taehyung can’t deny the lingering sense that something is alive here, quivering in the air.

A shudder crawls down his spine.

A rustle erupts on his right, high like a whistle.

It reads like words, for some reasons, like a whisper of welcoming.

The arcane from before has disappeared as well, but even then there is still some latent arcanic atmosphere that fills up the space. It reminds Taehyung of the one he can feel in Vanae, however much more potent here.

Taehyung peers at Elder Miseon when she turns around.

Wind curls around Miseon, ruffling her hair and tossing her gray braid on her shoulder. It tightens around her chest as one of the leaves presses on her cheek. Her arms lift. Her fingers dance in the air, as though reciprocating the embrace of the wind.

“Are we… Are we inside?”

“Yes,” Miseon smiles. “Welcome to Kaiya.”

Chapter End Notes

Helloooo It's been a while 😭🤳🏻🤍 I wasn't home in august, then I took an unexpected long and proper break from writing as I could feel myself get burned out sksksk But I am back with already three written chapters: CH25/26/27!! I had to write these 3 together, first to have chaps in advance, but also because I had to jump between those 3 while writing as I'd change things hehe (I'm never writing 3 chaps at once ever again that was so endless 😪)

Thank you so much again for your patience with SLB and me and for still commenting even while I was on hiatus :((I sound like a broken record but it really means the world every time

some of you take the time to write a comment, leave a kudos or add a bookmark, so really thank you everyone 🫂🤍

❧ Lastly: I moved Twitter account to @Plumiemie!!

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook wearing jewelry made from Taehyung's blood (there was a bit of a brainrot in the SLB Twitter Community about Taehyung making rubies from his blood with his hemomancy after the whole blood scene between Taekook in this chapter XDDD) made by KDrawzzz
❧ Art of Jungkook wearing a dress AND Taehyung's rubies made by KDrawzzz
❧ Concept art of if Kaiya had a "human" form made by KDrawzzz

❧ Art of Jungkook from the scene where they bleed to enter Kaiya made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Yumiii made by lesbiansexdevil

❧ Edits/poster teaser for Kaiya made by yooniedumplin
❧ Edits/posters for Taekook made by yooniedumplin

Chapter 26: Kaiya's Night Terrors

Chapter Summary

Kaiya is full of wonders and terrors that the group, and more specifically Jungkook and Taehyung will have to face.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is quite different from the others?? It's quite introspective so I hope y'all will still enjoy reading it 🥺🤍

Cw:

1) brief scenes of slight emotional abuse
2) yumi being herself, some bits of gruesomeness XD
3) blood
4) some descriptions of a corpse but they're brief and not too graphic
5) smol bits of violence, but again it's brief
6) multiple deaths: it happens several times but it isn't real!! Still adding this new content warning as tae's part might be a bit more upsetting for y'all than it was to me T___T

"Song" recs:

1) You can listen to this from the beginning to "The atmosphere thickens around them" : Dead Forest | Eerie and Quiet ASMR Ambience | 3 Hours
2) Then put this two together on until whenever you want to stop them, or until "I believe it is all we can do for now." : Tales of Darkness - 1 Hour of Dark and Mysterious Horror Music and 1 HOUR of Horror Church Bells Sounds
3) Then you can put this if you want until "They'll find a way out. I'm sure of it." : Mazoulew - Tourist (1 Hour Version)
4) Then you can put the first song of 2) until "Taehyung swings down."
5) You can put this until "It is good to see you awake and well." : WHEN THE LAST HOPE RUNS OUT - Sad Emotional Music Mix

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"This is…"

"Wonderful," Junhyun finishes for Namjoon. "Absolutely beautiful."

"Indeed, Darling. What a privilege to be allowed here. Thank you," Dahee smiles at Miseon. Her head jerks backward, as though something has bumped her head. "Oh." She rubs her forehead.

“Something touched me.”

“As I said, Kaiya is its own entity in more ways than one. It is quite mischievous, among other things,” Elder Miseon chuckles.

“Jungkook?”

Taehyung's gaze immediately searches for him. He finds Jungkook a few feet away, the latter swaying on his spot. Taehyung rushes up to him. “Sit down." He helps Jungkook kneel on the ground whose soil is also red. “Are you alright?”

Jungkook braces himself on his hands, head hanging low. “I’m dizzy.”

“Me too,” Yumi says from where she’s laid on the ground, her familiars next to her.

Taehyung inspects the palms he had cut for Jungkook. He makes a noncommittal noise of surprise when no wound can be seen on the unblemished skin. His own have healed as well. “Jungkook?” Jungkook does not budge, and so Taehyung shuffles to face him and cradles his face. “Hey, Viper.” Jungkook looks aghast, his lips part open and gaze distant. “I need you to talk to me, yeah? How do you feel?”

“It’s… It’s a lot.”

“Can you see any souls?” Yumi asks.

Jungkook shakes his head. “I should, considering the amount of deaths that have happened here.”

“The dead's souls are believed to be expunged.”

Jungkook nods and sits crossed legs. “I see.”

Taehyung grabs the water bottle his mother hands to him, and he flicks the cap open to aid Jungkook drink from it, cupping the back of his head.

“Thank you.” Jungkook heaves a deep sigh. He withdraws his arcane for a moment before his tattoos appear once more. “Even without actively using my arcane, I can still feel how many have died here. Dozen thousands upon dozens thousands. I can’t—” He raises a trembling hand to his mouth. “I can’t hear or see anything, but I can feel their deaths. It’s hard to explain, and a lot to take in.” There’s a reticence that envelops Jungkook, his shoulders drawing in on themselves.

Taehyung smiles to himself. “Does it feel good?”

Jungkook grows rigid. His lips press into a thin line.

Taehyung tilts then lowers his head to find Jungkook’s eyes. “Does it?”

It takes a moment, but Jungkook eventually nods, all hesitant and coy. “It’s wonderful,” he whispers, a hand gripping onto Taehyung’s arm. “It smells so somber and good.”

Taehyung brushes away one of Jungkook’s strands. “Then coming here has already been worth it.”

Jungkook’s tenseness fizzles out. There’s this muted awe that overtakes his face, aimed at Taehyung. His mouth opens then closes, whatever words he had been about to say now reneged.

“Yumi said death has an energy,” Yoongi begins, “can you feel it?”

“It’s everywhere.”

Jungkook closes his eyes. His flames spread around but they never go too far. They’re waiting for permission, Taehyung understands without really knowing how. The wind that had greeted Miseon and Dahee does so with Jungkook’s flames, snuffing out some of them while passing through others.

Jungkook seems to have gotten his response because his lips curve, his lids fluttering open.

“Have you been spoken to?” Miseon asks.

“I could hear Kaiya’s welcoming.” The remnants of Jungkook’s flames are fanned out by the wind, then seemingly absorbed by the soil.

“We can rest for a bit if you need to,” Taehyung proposes.

“No, I’m fine.” Jungkook stands, aided by Taehyung. “I want to continue.”

“If so.” Elder Miseon swivels on her feet to begin marching at the head of the group. “Follow me.”

Everyone trails after her, Taehyung and Jungkook at the back. Yumi is sprawled atop her boulder familiar that floats next to the group.

“The air is a bit thick, no? Kinda like high in the mountains,” Namjoon notes.

“Yeah. I feel it too,” Hoseok says, hugging his own chest. “It’s weird that you do. You’re human.”

“The arcane within Kaiya is raw and mighty, one that can be felt by anyone and anything,” Miseon explains.

Yoongi clicks his tongue. “I should have taken the arcane-detecting ring.”

Miseon chuckles. “I highly doubt it would have worked. Very few items taken from the outside and brought inside function as they should. It is the same for our arcane that may act differently,” she adds while peering at the ink that runs out of Yoongi's arcanic book.

Jimin hums. “How did the forest develop so much arcane?”

“Kaiya is a place as beautiful as it is tragic,” Elder Miseon sighs. “It used to be a bridge between Amaris and Vanae, between humans and dragonborns. However when the Great War began, this place was the first one to suffer from it, where nations were fighting to dominate this prolific territory. Humans, dragonborns and warlocks alike have shed blood here. Their deaths have given life to Kaiya.”

“Silver lining,” Taehyung and Jungkook both say at once. They look at each other with a smile.

“Lovebirds,” Jimin chides.

“Shut up.”

Taehyung observes his surroundings as Elder Miseon answers the questions fired at her. He can't help but be unnerved by how silent the forest is, even as they walk through a path with rows of scarlet trees framing them. No pit-a-pat of an animal or flap of wings can be heard.

He scans the trees' crowns, then the sinuous spaces he finds between trunks.

Still nothing.

Taehyung startles when a hand grabs his elbow.

"Sorry," Jungkook laughs. "Are you scared?"

Taehyung scoffs. "No."

"I'm freezing my butt off," Namjoon complains. "Why is it so cold? No one told me it'd be cold."

"Because the sun does not shine here. There is only winter in Kaiya."

"It's still bright though," Taehyung observes.

"It is indeed. Time and space are a little different. While the forest is stuck in a sole season with no sun, there is still some kind of night and day cycle thanks to the two moons Kaiya has," Elder Miseon clarifies. "One shines less than the others."

"Moons?"

"Yes," Miseon answers but doesn't say more.

Taehyung is about to ask another query when his hair raises at the back of his neck. He freezes. His head swivels around. There's still no inhabitant of the forest that he can see. Yet, where he had felt welcome at first, a sudden alarm bell rings in his mind.

The thought that he shouldn't be here awakens.

Worst of all, he's all of a sudden certain that they aren't quite alone anymore.

"I love this place," Jungkook says and pulls on Taehyung's arm to resume their walk.

"I think something is watching us."

"Me too," Jimin says.

"Me three," Seokjin agrees.

"Me four, five, and six. How strange," Yumi exclaims from where she had been face-planted atop her boulder familiar. She lifts her head. "I don't see anyone. Neither do you, huh?" She asks her lizard that shakes its head.

"No souls either," Jungkook adds.

Their trek through the forest feels both short yet impossibly long.

Everything looks the same, and Taehyung would be worried of them going in circles if they weren't guided by Elder Miseon. The only time where they reach a new type of habitat is when they enter

some kind of swamp covered in scarlet mud.

They walk above the series of little bridges carrying them from one side of a puddle to the other. Even then, the swamp is entirely red, the thin puddles of water resembling pools of blood more than anything else.

They arrive on a large path minutes later.

Quiet gasps echo in the quietude when the trees framing the way bend over their heads in a makeshift roof. They conceal the light, only slivers of it peeking through the leaves.

“Right. So the trees can move.” Namjoon dissolves into a litany of *‘Okay’* from where he’s hiding behind Seokjin, gripping onto the latter’s shoulders. “Also, was that blood in the swamp or—”

A rustle tears through the rest of Namjoon’s sentence.

“The fuck was that?” Hoseok clutches Minsoo’s arm, head darting around.

Another sound elevates in the area.

It’s louder, on Taehyung’s left, but it’s too *everywhere* to pinpoint the source of it. Whatever thing that may have been stalking them seems to want to make itself known.

“I swear to the Elders, if—” A screech tears out of Hoseok’s mouth. “Something grabbed my ankle!” He launches himself at Minsoo’s back as he climbs and wraps his legs around him. “May the Elders protect me. O Oracle, may the sins you have witnessed from me be cleansed, for I will —”

Taehyung tunes out the rest of the Hoseok's. He scrutinizes the forest, the group having come to a halt. The ruffles in the leaves are incessant now. Something must be darting across the trees.

Then, a stillness settles again.

“Is someone else with us?”

“The guardian?”

Miseon never answers as she walks off, the group forced to trail after her lest they find themselves without a guide.

“You better get off my back, kid, or you’ll become another tree here,” Minsoo warns when Hoseok doesn’t move from where he’s coiled around him.

“Something touched my leg, I swear to the Elders,” Hoseok squeaks. “You have to protec—”

Minsoo reaches behind himself to snatch Hoseok by the collar. He easily lifts him off and drops him down.

Hoseok scrambles up and throws himself at Seokjin instead. “Shouldn’t have come here. The hell is wrong with each one of you? With *me?”*

“Isn’t it beautiful, though?” Jungkook says.

“Blood bathes this forest,” Woobin shudders.

“I know. It makes it even prettier,” Jungkook smiles. “There’s beauty in death. In truth, I find the concept of dying quite exciting, actually, and the tales of how one has died can also be riveting.”

“You do know you’re genuinely a bit insane, Jungkook, right?“ Hoseok pipes up from the front of the group.

“Is that a problem?”

Hoseok snorts. “Nah. It’s kinda funny. You say some stuff that is so out of pocket sometimes, it's no wonder Hyuna likes you so much.”

Woobin makes a face that Jungkook doesn’t notice as he wanders off to observe a red peony Hoseok shows him.

Taehyung does see it, however. He leans near Woobin to say “And you were making advances to him when you can’t handle his necromancy and all that comes with it?”

Defiance flashes in Woobin’s gaze. “Who said I can’t?”

“Your fucking face whenever he makes a morbid remark.”

“I’m just not familiar with this aspect of his life. But I could learn, if he one day decides that you’re not worth his time anymore,” Woobin retorts.

“Then you wouldn’t be disturbed if he skins rodents, other animals and eventually human corpses whenever he’ll want to train his arcane? Or if he sometimes talks to himself in the middle of the night and you only belatedly realize that he'd been speaking with a dead soul?” A perhaps misplaced — and childish — satisfaction swirls in Taehyung when he catches the concern that flashes on Woobin’s face.

“He… He what? Does he skin them for food?”

“No. He can raise the dead. *Corpses.* How else is he supposed to hone that skill?”

“I—” Woobin clears his throat. “Well. Makes sense." He shrugs. "Could still get used to it.”

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “Right.”

“Taehyung. Look.” Jungkook excitedly points ahead. “The side of this tree’s bark looks like an arm and hand. Do you think someone was dismembered here? Maybe we will see a head somewhere.”

Taehyung immediately peers at Woobin who makes another one of his moue that he smooths to indifference when he notices Taehyung’s gaze on him.

Taehyung tongues at his cheek when his mouth twitches. He curls an arm around Jungkook’s back. “Where?”

“I think it was just in my head, but I saw something else too.”

Taehyung looks in the new direction Jungkook points at. “I don’t see anything. Only regular tree bark.”

“I don’t want us to approach it, but look a little closer,” Jungkook instructs. Taehyung squints. “You don’t see it at the back? Not on the tree.”

“A limb?”

“No. Something else.”

“What else?”

"You really don't see it?"

"See what?"

“The green beast of jealousy floating in the air. You birthed it yourself, how can you miss it?”

Taehyung levels Jungkook with the most unamused stare he can muster. “I’m not speaking to you anymore,” he announces and pulls away from Jungkook to join the group.

Jungkook’s laugh echoes behind him. “Still not jealous?”

“No reason to be. I was being an ass, as I tend to be.”

Jungkook loops their arms together. “Then why give Woobin a reality check on what being married to me entails?”

“Because he’s naive.”

“Is that the only reason why?”

Taehyung hesitates on how to answer, and it appears to displease both his arcane and dragon.

He can nearly feel something akin to anger in the way his arcane coils and snaps in his breath pouch as a mute staccato rumbles at the back of his throat. There's a pull to his eyes, followed by an unexpected urge to scent Jungkook.

Even if tentatively, Taehyung partially listens to them.

"No." Taehyung doesn't scent Jungkook no matter how much he wants to. He's already indulged his dragon too much. Instead, he places a hand on Jungkook's nape, lightly squeezing once.

"Why else, then?"

"Because I think no one can handle and understand this side of you as well as I can," Taehyung answers and *Elders.* He probably shouldn't have blurted that out. It was too cocky and honest, wasn't it? *Vulnerable.* Because how is he so certain of this? Hell, Yoongi and Namjoon have known Jungkook for longer than—

"That's true. And not just my necromancy. Only you understand me this well," Jungkook admits, feeling equally open if the way he doesn't meet Taehyung's gaze is any hint. "You—" His fingers tighten on Taehyung's arm. "I wouldn't want it to be anyone else. S'just you."

"Good," Taehyung says in spite of his better judgment.

"Lovebirds! Hurry it up!"

Taehyung sighs as he resumes his walk with Jungkook. Jungkook buries his face in Taehyung's shoulder but it barely hides his smile.

As an hour elapses, the silence remains.

Taehyung is still certain they're being stalked. He doesn't know by *what,* and Elder Miseon still hasn't granted anyone any answer.

Another half hour passes where they arrive at what looks like the ruins of what had once been a market. It's desolate, yet it is easy to see how there had once been life here: broken stands, destroyed houses and shattered carriages litter the area.

In one of the homes, plates and glasses left on a table, a flower seated on each chair.

They pass by an intricate object that Taehyung can tell is infused with arcane.

"Kaiya is riddled with vestiges more arcanic than the next one," Elder Miseon says for the first time in a couple hours. "I suggest not tinkering with any of them, as I, and the guardian, are not aware of their properties."

Regardless of the warning, Jungkook still extends a hand toward a sphere-like item. It has what looks like letters on it that Taehyung can't make out.

Taehyung smacks the hand away. "Don't touch that, dumbass."

Minutes later, Taehyung is the one to be tempted with a colorful and shining glass tea set.

"Don't touch that, idiot," Jungkook parrots, and this time, he's the one that bats away Taehyung's probing fingers.

Taehyung scowls.

It goes in like this for a while, with the two of them saving each other from perhaps unfortunate fates.

"Oh my God! What *is* that?" Jungkook gasps for the impteeth time.

"What? What did you see? Where? Show me, show me." Taehyung jogs toward Jungkook who's examining some kind of mirror encrusted in gems. The surface is entirely black, not reflecting anything. "Damn. What do you think it does?"

"I don't know. I'm curious."

"Yeah, me too."

"Should we look at it?"

"No. It's too risky."

"Right, right."

"Right."

They both look at each other.

Taehyung clears his throat. "Although—"

Jungkook expectantly looks at him. "Yes?"

"I mean, what's the worst that could happen?"

"Death?" Jungkook bursts into laughter and it sounds a tad too maniacal, even more when Taehyung echoes it. "But even that is fine!"

"True. You can raise me, right?"

"Right, right, right."

A silence stretches between them.

"So…"

"Maybe it's fine if we only touch it with the tip of our finger," Taehyung says.

"Right?! I was thinking the same! And since it's a mirror, the properties must be related to the sense of view, not of touch. Probably. Hopefully."

"Exactly," Taehyung nods. "I don't think it's *that* risky."

"Same. Let's touch it on count of three."

"Three… Two…"

They both reach for the mirror, one with a clawed finger, the other with his dagger. However before either can graze the handle, a hand smacks the back of their heads in two consecutive slaps.

"Do not. Touch. *Anything.* You are both insufferable children," Dahee snips. "Behave."

"Actually," Jungkook raises his dagger, "we were being responsible."

"And about to use an external object to touch the mirror," Taehyung continues. "Unlike her." He nods in Yumi's direction, the latter eating one of the leaves scattered on the ground.

Yumi hums and eats another one. "Nothing."

"What does it taste like?" Taehyung and Jungkook ask together.

"Blood. It doesn't even taste that good," Yumi pouts to her lizard and continues her exploration of the market.

Yoongi calls out Jungkook at some point to ask him about the name and properties of a deep red plant.

Taehyung is at the back of the group, keeping an eye out for any person or creature that is still trailing after them.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” Yumi says as she slows down her pace to trudge next to Taehyung.

“Don’t speak to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re the reason why the man with the scent got a hold of me for six months? Because you kidnapped my husband?”

“For the latter, I will take full responsibility. However for the former, I was simply doing what I was being paid for. It was never personal.”

“You still participated in it.”

“But I wasn’t the instigator. If it hadn’t been me, it would have been another warlock. So is it really that big a deal?”

Taehyung emits a humourless chuckle. “He mutilated me Elders know how many times and fucked with my mind for over six months. *You*, yourself, took some of my wings and must have sold them or made some fucking clothes out of them. It’s a pretty fucking big deal.”

“It was a while ago, though. Why are you still resentful about it?”

Taehyung halts. Yumi does too. He observes her, and while he does not trust her at all, he still believes the genuine confusion that knits her face. “Why do you think.”

“I don’t know.” Yumi shrugs, scratching the lizard’s neck on her head. “That’s why I’m asking.”

“Because I still bear the scars he branded on me inside and out.”

“Oooh… I don’t really understand but I guess that makes sense!”

“How can you not understand something so simple?”

“Life does not stop at any inconvenience or bad thing that happens to us. Life never really stops, actually. We should chase after it, even once we’re dead. So I don’t see a point in dwelling in what has already occurred and cannot be changed. Why not move forward?"

“It’s easier said than done. Some wounds take months, years or decades to heal. *If* they heal,” Taehyung explains and he doesn’t even know why he does, but a certain interest flickers in him because Yumi is so damn *odd.*

Yumi hums. “I see. I never pondered about that. I usually heal incredibly fast.”

Taehyung doesn’t respond as he catches up to the group that makes their way through ruins of streets and alleys.

“If I apologize, would you accept it?”

“No.”

Yumi snorts. “Fair enough.”

“You’re so damn weird,” Taehyung mutters and shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Do you believe in second chances?”

“Not for you.”

“I don’t mean for me, but rather for Dohyun. He truly loves you, as you already know.”

“I’d rather die than accept this kind of love.”

Yumi chuckles, as though aware of something Taehyung isn’t. “I see. What are your plans for him?”

“Kill him, obviously.”

“Good!” Yumi smiles. “Working for him doesn’t mean that I agree with what he has done to you.”

Taehyung warily surveys her. “Yet you did nothing to stop him, the opposite.”

“Sometimes survival is about putting yourself first, regardless of the cost that may befall on those around you. Plus I had struck a deal with him. So.”

“What kind of deal?”

“He was providing me with something I needed.”

“Money?”

Yumi shakes her head. “No. Sustenance and knowledge.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“As I told Jungkook, Dohyun isn’t aware that I’m a necromancer. He simply believes that I’m an oddity, as many people do." Yumi heaves a deep sigh. “Aaah. I should apologize to you. I know my father would want me to, he’s the one who has taught me all about etiquette and things like these. But I wouldn’t mean my apology, so wouldn’t it be worthless?”

“Why wouldn’t you mean it?”

“Remorse isn’t something I feel very often,” Yumi says, and Taehyung wonders if Yumi ever feels anything to begin with. “It *did* happen in the past, but it’s rare. And don’t get me wrong, creating the spell to seal your breaths with other warlock friends had been very amusing. I learned a lot.”

“You’d do it again.” Taehyung doesn’t bother phrasing it as a question. “You’re batshit crazy.”

“I believe we all are to some extent. However, in spite of that, you still find me interesting, right?” Yumi grins. “Otherwise I’d be dead already.”

“Rather, I’m well aware you can’t be killed that easily. I’m not a fool.”

Yumi chuckles. “I shall leave you before your husband tries to figure out how killable I am.”

Taehyung’s gaze darts on Jungkook who’s walking up to him, his glacial stare born onto Yumi. Yumi skips away, and Taehyung breathes a little easier.

“Everything okay?” Jungkook worries.

“Yeah. Just talked to her for a bit,” Taehyung waves off. “She gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

"I don't like that she's trying to befriend you."

"She wasn't. I think she's curious at best, planning something at worst."

Jungkook crosses his arms over his chest as he falls into steps with Taehyung. "Maybe. She's hiding so many things. I want to know what."

"Me too. She knows other necromancers, perhaps even your mother."

"My issue is her unpredictability. She said she'll work with us, but she could turn her vest around in the blink of an eye. She's also *insane.* Not on the same wavelength as Seohyung or Dohyun, but it still leaves room for a lot of uncertainty regarding her behavior."

Taehyung nods. "Let's keep an eye on her. We've got other things to wor—"

"What is wrong with you?" Yoongi blurts out.

Taehyung and Jungkook look at Yumi.

Yumi is laid down on her front on the ground, a trail of some kind of pink dust neatly lined atop a leaf. She rolls up another leaf to form some kind of tube with it that she presses against one of her nostrils. She leans forward and, without warning, she snorts the line in one go. "Ugh." She shudders and shakes her head. Her boulder familiar rolls around her. "You liar!" She rises on her feet. "It did nothing!" She shouts and kicks her familiar. "You told me it was some special powder!"

Taehyung's eye twitches.

He swivels around to follow a perturbed Elder Miseon who stares at Yumi.

They explore the forest for what feels like more than half a day, and it most likely has been. They aren’t given any break from Elder Miseon, and it has reached a point where Jungkook suspects that she is purposefully exhausting them.

The only question being for what.

After leaving behind the vestiges of a town, they had entered the forest anew, and haven’t left it since then.

The group drinks and munches on some snacks here and there, however Taehyung does not, and Jungkook worries.

Taehyung says that it’s due to the anxious knot twisting his stomach, but Jungkook can’t help but wonder if this is all there is to it. While Taehyung had been impossibly tactile and open during the days that had followed Jungkook's return to Vanae, something has changed today.

Perhaps it was prompted by his fight with Hoseok, or perhaps it is caused by another matter, however Jungkook recognizes the faint barrier Taehyung has drawn between them. It’s fleetingly tamed by the sporadic palms Taehyung places on Jungkook’s lower back or by the teasing quips.

“Still nothing?” Namjoon wonders, tearing Jungkook out of his musing.

“No.” Jungkook had taken out his necromancy book at some point that he commonly uses to store souls’ memories, in case some soul may want to leave a trace in the pages.

“Revna don’t like this place. Can we go home?”

“We will after we’ve talked to the guardian, alright?” Jungkook reassures.

“It’s only alright if Revna gets to eat cake. And griffin. Revna reaaally likes griffin.”

“We have a deal. I’m sure Taehyung will hunt some for you," Jungkook chuckles. Revna makes a happy noise in Jungkook’s mind. "Have you been feeling alright?"

"Revna don't know..."

"What do you mean?"

"Revna really don't like this place."

"What is it that you don't like about it?."

"It looks like inside the ruby."

Jungkook pauses. He gestures for Taehyung to do the same. "How so?"

"The ruby is all red inside. The forest is all red too. It's like Kookie is inside the ruby too, but inside the ruby is lonely so Revna don't want Kookie to be in it. Revna don't make sense… Revna is confused." A series of unhappy noises erupt afterwards.

"What's going on?" Taehyung inquires..

"Revna doesn't like the forest. She says it resembles what the space is inside the ruby."

"What *is* inside the ruby?"

"Nothing. Just some red smooth ground and red 'sky', according to her."

"Does she want to come out?"

"No."

Jungkook shakes his head.

"Let's keep an eye on her. Rev, if you feel weird at some point, you tell Jungkook, understood?"

"Okayyy. Revna loves Taetae."

Jungkook translates for her and the tip of Taehyung's ear flush up as he mumbles a *'Me too'* and swivels around.

The atmosphere thickens around them, where Jungkook can't see between the trees anymore.

Contrary to how colorless and darkened the world is whenever his eyes adorn those of his necromancy, here Kaiya retains its vibrant red color, akin to the sinuous path they have to walk through in a line.

Jungkook wrestles against the clustered branches obstructing their way.

"They aren't any insects," Jungkook comments. "At all."

"Yeah, s'fucking weird," Minsoo mutters behind him. "Didn't notice prints of any animal either, whether on ground or in the trees."

Jungkook blows on his bangs when he finally comes out of the dense bushes. Jungkook grasps Taehyung's wrist next to him. It's cold again, and Jungkook's concern about Taehyung's depleted arcane heightens.

Minsoo must notice the same thing because he gives a vial to Taehyung that the latter downs. Heat warms up Taehyung's skin anew.

Jungkook's gaze stumbles on Minsoo's. He mouths an *'Is he okay?'*. Minsoo ignores him.

Jungkook's jaws clench.

"This forest is one of the creepiest places I've ever been to, and I used to visit cemeteries with Jungkook when we were younger," Namjoon says.

"Fascinating nonetheless, is it not?" Dahee smiles.

This new area resembles the previous market, however this one seems to be the more of an old plaza. Some stone work replaces the grass that has still overgrown in-between the marble slabs.

Jungkook inhales and exhales, his mouth part open.

He can taste death on his tongue, something metallic and dry, with a hint of rot that most would find repulsive. His tongue darts on his lower lip. He intertwines his fingers with Taehyung's, a haziness clouding his mind once more at how pungent death is here, more than it has been thus far.

"You're alright?"

"Yeah," Jungkook answers.

The eerie quietude is gone. More and more sounds can be heard in the forest. Rustles, rapid padding and snapping twigs. The wind whistles. It wraps around the area and Jungkook can see how opaque it is turning, how it resembles a thickening mist that takes a light red color.

"You're seeing the mist too, right?" Hoseok says with a strangled noise.

“I can.”

“Same.”

“Me too. Is it getting closer?” Woobin asks.

“I don’t know, but it’s definitely becoming denser,” Yoongi replies. “I can’t see any further than the trees surrounding the plaza.”

“Don’t venture far. Remain grouped and keep an eye out for anything that may approach us.” Taehyung’s hand tightens around Jungkook. “Stay close to me.”

Jungkook nods. “You too.”

A church bell echoes in the distance.

It’s a sole ring that resounds through the area, the sound drawn out and muffled. It’s impossible to pinpoint from where it’s from, echoing directly between Jungkook’s ears.

“You heard that?”

“Loud and clear. Where the hell is it coming from?”

Another bell rings. It’s higher than before, however still deep and sonorous.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. We’re gonna die. We’re about to fucking die.”

“We are not. You may hold onto me, dear,” Junhyun says to Hoseok who immediately does, his arms wrapped around one of Junhyun’s. "I can’t figure out where the bell rings from.”

“Me either, Darling.”

Ding…

Ding…

Ding…

It’s closer.

“Wait. Where’s Elder Miseon?” Hoseok asks.

“Oh.” Seokjin makes a sound of surprise. “Where is she?”

“Elder Miseon?” Dahee calls out.

No response can be heard.

Ding…

Ding…

Ding.

They move further. They pass by a broken stand where a couple lumps of ashes are piled behind it. Bones protrude from them. Jungkook scans the area, looking for any sign of a presence, or of a building similar to a church, however none can be found through the mist.

A drop falls on the side of Jungkook's neck.

He peers up and pauses.

“Everyone stop. Look up.”

There’s a bell in the sky, barely noticeable amidst the fog concealing it.

It’s far above them, yet it seems *gigantic* from where it dangles in the middle of the plaza, seemingly floating. The clapper slowly sways from side to side. It rings in the air when it hits the lid.

Then, it comes to a halt.

“Dad,” Taehyung starts, “can you blow some wind toward the bell?”

Junhyun executes. He forms a circle in front of his mouth. The cone of wind struggles against the denser mist, however it manages to dispel some of it.

"Holy fuck."

Gnarled, rock-like fingers are curled at the crown of the bell, the claws dug onto the bell’s metal. Some dust and pebbles crumble from the knuckles when they faintly shift to one side, then to the other, and to the right again. The statue, if it is what the talon is, must be as tall as Taehyung's dragon form, and as large as Junhyun's.

The mist hides the bell again before Jungkook can observe more, however he still catches some kind of rope that oscillates behind the clapper. Junhyun tries to do the same again, but this time his wind seemingly collides against the mist, unable to pierce through.

“Was that—”

“It looked like a dragon’s talon.”

"Might be a statue?"

“What the fuck is going on…”

"Whatever that thing is was the one to ring the bell."

Jungkook’s skin pebbles.

Seconds later, a hand touches his shoulder.

He turns around and is met with no one.

The trees become less and less distinguishable, swallowed by the fog. It soon engulfs the forest as a whole as it gains in proximity.

Something tugs on Jungkook's sleeve, pulling once to where he had seen the rope. He tunes out the concerned remarks that flare around him. “Come with me,” he says to Taehyung and drags him toward the plaza’s center, the others following suit.

The rope is there, pooling on the marble and elevating high up the sky. There’s a push on Jungkook's shoulder. He lets go of Taehyung.

“I’m gonna ring the bell," Jungkook announces.

A chorus of *‘I don’t think it’s wise’, ‘It’s too dangerous’ and ‘We don’t know what it does’* trail after his sentence.

“Why do you want to?” Taehyung asks, the only one who doesn’t seem worried about Jungkook’s newfound objective.

“I don’t know.”

“Has a soul spoken to you?” Yumi questions next.

“Not quite, but I feel like they’re guiding me, in a way."

“Do it, then.” Taehyung nods toward the rope. “We’re here.”

Jungkook bobs his head in agreement. His fingers curl around the rope. In spite of the bell and rope’s size, pulling on it isn’t as difficult as he had assumed it to be. It’s easy, actually, the cord light.

Ding.

Jungkook scans the sky.

The bell can’t be seen anymore, however he catches through the mist the sparse drops that fall down. A pitter-patter begins, faint and sporadic.

Ding.

Jungkook walks backward for a couple steps, up until his back knocks against something. He swivels around.

“It’s me,” Taehyung says, a palm on Jungkook’s middle back

“Is there something we’re supposed to do? Aside from ringing it?” Jimin questions.

“I’m not sure,” Dahee muses. “Elder Miseon had mentioned a matter about challenges. It could be one of them.”

“That’d be fun,” Yumi giggles and claps her hands. “Let’s be careful, however not too much.”

Ding.

“How do you feel?”

Jungkook glances at Taehyung. “Unnerved.”

Taehyung frowns. “What?”

“What do you mean, what? Aren’t *you* unnerved?”

“I didn’t speak a word,” Taehyung says.

“Oh.”

Hoseok whimpers. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Jungkook grips onto the back of Taehyung’s shirt.

Ding.

The mist has begun to inch onto the plaza, moving faster now. The sounds of the bell are accompanied by those of more water plopping down. The wind coils and carries the fog closer to the group in a, at first, tamed whirlwind that aggravates by the seconds. It ruffles clothes, swipes leaves and dry soil.

“*Hi.*”

A tap on Jungkook’s arm.

When he looks to the side, he spots the shape of a face in the mist that vanishes right after.

Ding.

More and more nebulous faces appear in the fog. Sometimes they’re attached to a body, other times they simply float for a second.

“Do you see this?” Jungkook asks.

“See what?”

“Faces around us. Bodies too, of adults and children, I think.”

“I don’t,” Taehyung mutters. “Yumi?”

“Nothing, but I can’t see souls to begin with. However I must note that my lizard is not enjoying the spectacle.”

"Revna wants to go home. Revna feels weird."

"How weird?"

"Revna don't know."

The group falls quiet.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

“*How do you feel?”*

“*Can you hear?”*

“I can hear you.” Jungkook looks around to check if anyone is hearing the voices, but no one reacts to them. “Who are you?”

“*Who are you?”* The voice echoes. “ *Listen.* ” It’s followed by laughter.

“Hearing voices?” Taehyung asks and Jungkook nods. “Be careful of what you say to them.”

“*Name.”* A gravelly voice demands behind Jungkook’s ear.

“Jungkook,” he answers. “I’m a necromancer.”

At this addition, a flurry of intelligible whispers answer him. They sound happy. *Relieved.* He can’t make out any words, but the elation in them is palpable.

Ding.

The voices are louder now. Hands and fingers grip onto Jungkook’s legs, then arms curl around his chest and neck. He tries to shrug them off but whenever he does, they vanish only to manifest themselves again seconds after.

Every billow of wind is a sentence, or rather a recurrent word that he eventually manages to decipher.

‘Healing’.

Something yanks on Jungkook’s hair. He pivots. Still no one, which isn’t too surprising, except that *no one* else is here with him.

The group isn’t there.

“Taehyung?” His voice sounds muffled to his own ears, as though underwater. “Yoongi? Joon? Revna, do you know where they went? Revna?” He freezes. His hand flies to his neck.

The necklace is gone.

Jungkook breathes out a shaky sigh. He continues to move around, barely able to see beyond a couple feet from himself. He trails after the increasing metallic scent. He narrowly misses the expanse of water, catching himself in time and stumbling backward before he can fall.

The river is red, and from the smell it emanates, what’s in it is more blood rather than water.

The liquid oscillates. Faces form in the blood: of men, women, children, all seemingly crying for help but immersed by a wave. Bloody limbs tear out of the liquid. Hands reach out, washed away moments later. Yells swarm from the river, louder than the next one.

Ding.

A roar drowns the human cries.

It’s the same dragon roar Jungkook has heard in the past. He flinches. He presses the heel of his hands against his temple where a migraine is suddenly pounding.

It hurts.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

Too loud.

Ding.

Everything is too loud. The bell, the drops that have become rain, the dragon’s holler.

Jungkook wants to help the spirits that he believes to be trapped in the river, however he doesn’t know how.

Something trickles down his ears and neck and Jungkook wonders if the pained dragon cry is about to implode his brain.

Jungkook staggers on his feet, tears springing in his eyes.

“*Come, come. Quiet.”*

“*Come.”*

“*Jump. Safe.”*

A blood hand emerges from the river. It’s joined by a second, a third, a dozen and more. They all crawl toward Jungkook, fighting against the current.

Ding.…

Ding.…

Ding.

The roar again.

Excruciating.

“Please, help m—”

Liquid wraps around his wrists. The hands made from the river’s blood pull on Jungkook’s arms. He doesn’t fight against them and falls.

A sharp coldness is the only thing that hits his body as he’s swallowed by the stream.

The roar is muffled, soon disappearing the more Jungkook sinks in the water. He tries to look around but all he can see is a darkening red. *Something* coils over his chest, then his ankles, wrists. His throat is next, and before he realizes it, his mouth is covered too.

Jungkook wrestles, however he stops when he hears a voice.

“*Trust.* ”

The whispers flicker back around him.

The distressed roar is fully gone now.

“*Hi… Jungkook.* ”

“*How do you feel?* ”

“*Help.* ”

“*Trust? Heal.* ”

"Heal."

"Heal… Heal… Heal…"

Feelings that aren’t his own surge within him: fear, surrender, loneliness, and most of all, an awakening hope.

All at once, the laments intensify.

He can hear all cry in agony. The roar comes back again, worse than before. Jungkook’s mouth opens in a silent yell and water fills his lungs. His consciousness recedes but Jungkook *has* to understand what the souls are telling him.

However the roar drowns everything, and next himself.

“What the fuck do you mean he’s gone?! He was right next to us!"

The fear is all consuming because Jungkook is gone again. *Jungkook is gone.*

“Shit.”

“Jungkook! We’re here!”

“This is why we shouldn’t have rang that damn stupid bell! It doesn’t matter if he felt like doing so! What if he died or worse?!"

“Who gives a flying fuck! Find Jungkook!”

“Jungkook!”

Taehyung runs through the mist, uncaring of losing the others. He calls out Jungkook’s name over and over again but he can't see him anywhere. "Jung—” Taehyung's world tips upside down at his next step. Water submerges him, disorientating. His arms wave around as he searches for the surface.

There’s a glint in the distance. Something of a white blue. Minuscule.

Taehyung feels more than he realizes that what he's seeing are the breaths in the wedding he had given to Jungkook.

He swims toward it.

The water feels dense around him, hard to navigate through. Taehyung swings his arm forward when he's close to the ring.

It doesn't find anything.

He does it again.

This time, it hits something that he grabs.

A hand.

Taehyung tugs the body toward him. He swims toward what he hopes to be the surface. His lungs burn the longer he remains underwater.

Taehyung gasps when he breaks out of the water.

A cough erupts next to him. He doesn't get to glance at who he's brought back before he's yanked upward and thrown onto the ground.

"Fucking hell, kid," Minsoo says and lowers next to him.

"Jungkook." Taehyung scrambles up to find Jungkook on his knees, entirely covered in red liquid. He scurries toward him and cups his face. "Viper."

Jungkook whines. His teeth clench together as he folds into himself, arms hugging his chest. He pants, erratic and too rapid. Raven flames slither out of him. They wander on the ground and in the river, as though trying to grab something.

The bell rings twelve times in a row before it comes to an eerie halt.

"I felt a drop," Dahee says.

"So did I."

Taehyung tries to meet Jungkook's gaze but it's distant. "Jungkook, can you hear me?"

"Fuck."

"I've been feeling drops for the past minutes," Hoseok says.

Woobin sniffs the air. "Is it just me or does it smell weird?"

"My book isn't detecting anything," Yoongi says. "My arcane is… It's there, but it's not functioning as it should be. The ink is running out of the pages again."

A warm rain slowly befalls on them.

"Is there anything you can do, Yoongi?" Jimin wonders.

“I—I don’t know, Chim.”

“Don’t call me that,” Jimin says, his voice suddenly sharpened with a warning edge.

Taehyung peers at Yoongi who looks confused.

“What?” Yoongi stares at Jimin. “You told me I could.”

“No. Don’t. Just… Just don’t.” Jimin lifts a hand to his forehead. He shakes his head and steps away from Yoongi.

The pitter-patter gains in volume, the deluge so heavy and full that it chases away the mist. It’s even harder to see anything now.

“The rain smells really off.”

Taehyung looks down.

It’s hard to tell at first, because he’s covered in the red water from the river. However he notices how instead of washing the liquid away, the rain covers him in more carmine.

“Blood," Taehyung realizes. "Kaiya was drowned in blood. The rivers, the ground." He glances up. "The sky.”

“It’s raining blood.”

“Well,” Seokjin starts. “It certainly is a fashion statement.”

“Not fucking funny, Seokjin,” Hoseok spits.

“I told you to not talk to me!” Jimin jerks away from Yoongi who walks away, hurt written all over his face.

“Why s’it getting darker here,” Hoseok mumbles. “Fuck. I’m starving.”

“It’s not?” Seokjin says.

“Darling? Junhyun?”

Taehyung startles when a scream rips out of Jungkook’s mouth. Jungkook’s hands plaster over his ears, nails sinking into the skin, and his black eyes are wide open as tears fall from them and wipe away the red drenching him. His voice suddenly dies in his throat, his lips still part open around a silent cry.

“Jungkook? What's going on?" Taehyung worries.

“Necromancers do tend to lose themselves to insanity,” Yumi pipes, her gaze riveted on Jungkook.

“Shut the fuck up if you won’t help,” Hoseok says. “I need food.”

Minsoo approaches Jungkook. He must try to use his healing breath, however he hisses when he touches Jungkook’s shoulder where a flame comes out of.

“His flame hurt you?”

Minsoo shakes his hand. “It burnt.”

But they don’t burn Taehyung. They also don’t hurt Yoongi when the latter tries to pass his fingers through one.

“See?” Yoongi says. “They don’t wound Taehyung either.”

“But I swear it—” Minsoo pats his chest, a glower knitting his face. His eyes widen. “My healing breath is gone. I can’t feel it anymore.”

“I need to eat. Need something to eat.” Hoseok collapses on the ground, clutching at his stomach. “Give me food.”

“Darling? Where are you? Jimin? Taehyung?” Dahee walks around, seemingly not seeing any of them anymore.

Woobin's eyes widen, fear washing across his face. "Father?"

Soon, the rain thickens. It becomes more of a curtain now.

Taehyung can’t see his mother anymore, nor Jimin, Hoseok or Yoongi. No one. His head turns toward Jungkook.

He’s still here.

Taehyung tries to grasp Jungkook’s wrist, however his hands pass through it. Jungkook’s arm falls into a red splatter, then the rest of his body does, now nothing more than a pool of blood.

Taehyung calls out for his family, but it’s echoed with silence. A dizziness overtakes his mind. The scent and taste of blood suffuses his senses. The blood rain engulfs him, taking away his air. Taehyung tries to catch himself on something, however his hand meets void.

Ding… ding… ding…

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung’s eyes dart toward Jungkook on his right.

“Everything okay?” Jungkook is breathtaking. He’s dressed differently, his garment complimented by the throne of gold and marble he’s seated on.

“Weren’t we at Kaiya?”

“Mh?” Jungkook chuckles. He places a hand above Taehyung’s. “You haven’t been sleeping well lately. Nightmares again?”

Taehyung blinks away the blurriness. He peers ahead.

He’s at the citadel, he realizes, at the same place where he and Jungkook had held their wedding ceremony. The raised sittings are brimming with people; humans and dragonborns alike.

“No I— I swear we were just inside Kaiya with everyone else, and there was this bloody rain—”

“We weren’t. We’re at Amaris, Taehyung. We went to Kaiya six years ago. You’re back with us.”

Taehyung is confused, but Jungkook seems so certain of himself, and Taehyung trusts him. He *hasn't* been sleeping well, after all.

“Kaiya has healed, the plague too. They both have for a while. Years.”

“Right, I’m just— I’m not feeling well.”

“It’s alright,” Jungkook kindly smiles. “You’ll remember everything soon. It still happens from time to time after… After everything. It’s alright.” He makes a motion and produces a wine glass from his hand. “Here. You should drink this. It will help.”

Taehyung does without question.

It tastes like pomegranate, but it leaves a metallic tinge behind. “What are we doing here?”

“It is our consecration and crowning. We have both become Kings of Amaris, and leaders of Vanae.”

“What about Seohyung and Sungmin?”

“Oh, them?” Jungkook laughs and peers to the side. “They are no trouble anymore.”

Taehyung follows Jungkook’s gaze.

Seohyung’s head is planted on a golden spear. Next to her is Sungmin’s, and more are lined up at the balcony for all to see: Yumi, the man with the scent, Seungwon, and so many more that Taehyung does not recognize. There is even the head of a child next to the one of a woman that appears to be the mother, if the similarities in their features are any hint.

"Who are they?"

"Fools. Cowards. You always indulge me so devotedly, even the madness in me. It had been craving to take to court those that had wronged you."

"Court? Why are they dead, then?"

" *My* court, Taehyung." A dark amusement colors Jungkook's eyes and the raspy timber of his voice. "Of skull and bones. Of dagger and blood. Of death, if you will."

"You judged them for their sins?"

Jungkook hums. "It wasn't as much of a judgment as it was an execution."

"You are no God," Taehyung whispers, yet it is weaved with a veneration that would put to shame the most devout believer.

"I know." Jungkook surveys Taehyung. "But it is fun to play as one, is it not?"

"No living being should be the one to choose who lives and who does not," Taehyung says but does not believe his own words.

"They made that choice for themselves when they decided to wear your wings. To make leather out of your skin, jewelry out of your scales and goods out of your bones." Blood begins to drop from one of the staked heads in a steady trickle. "I was nothing but a harbinger of a fate they had carved for themselves through your flesh."

"Crazed Viper." The words should be laced with scorn and disgust rather than the fondness that coats them, however Taehyung can't ignore the pleased vindication that swirls in him, let alone deny his adoration for the Prince of Death.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?”

Taehyung nods. “I’m glad they're gone. That Seohyung is gone too.”

“You’re the one who gave me her head.”

“I did?”

“I asked. Some time later, her bloody head was in my palms. It was the best gift you could have given me.” Jungkook interlocks his warm fingers with Taehyung’s. There are some red speckles on the knuckles. “I would have done the same for Dohyun if I had not been more keen on watching him suffer.”

"Has he?"

"Yes. I saw to it myself."

“I see.” It makes sense, right? Everything does.

“Now, let us bask in the spectacle.”

A display similar to the one that had taken place during their wedding starts. It harmonizes warlocks and dragonborns’ arcanes, more cohesive than before. A difference resides in the way some of the performers walk up the stairs to take the golden spears and start a macabre dance with the severed heads.

It's horrifyingly beautiful.

Taehyung can’t look away, entranced. He frees his hand from Jungkook to press his palm against his rapidly pulsating heart.

The taste of metal worsens.

The spectacle ends.

Taehyung closes his eyes, overwhelmed with emotion. He places his hand above Jungkook's once more, his fingers sliding beneath the palm. He squeezes it.

Jungkook does not squeeze back.

If anything, Jungkook's hand feels oddly rigid. Bony, even, unlike the tender hold Taehyung has been accustomed to.

Taehyung opens his eyes.

The sight before him is null.

All that stretches ahead is a complete darkness. The only light he can perceive comes from above him, of a silver hue.

The Moon shines on him through a hole in a rock ceiling.

"Are we in a cave?" Taehyung wonders. When no response arrives, he turns his head toward Jungkook. "Is this a warlock's tric—"

The rest of his sentence dies in his throat.

"Jungkook?"

Jungkook's head is lolled forward, his face hidden by his longer hair.

"Jungkook."

Taehyung reaches out to him. He gently tilts Jungkook's head back, yet a crack elevates in the air.

Jungkook's eyes are open, however the black from the irises is gone, now of a light gray. His skin is ashen, with a pallid blue hue to it. *Sick.* His features are sunken into his face, his veins thin and of a pale purple. It's almost as though his blood has been drained from him.

Taehyung peers down.

Jungkook's hand is the same: stiff and cold. His fingers too, the dry, flaking skin hugging the bones. The warmth is gone. The honeyed color too.

An erratic respiration breaks through the silence.

It's Taehyung's, who snatches his hand away from Jungkook. Something snaps when he does, and Jungkook's hand bends backward. Taehyung tries to cradle Jungkook's cheeks but his trembling fingers hover above, unable to bring himself to touch him.

No breath raises Jungkook's chest.

He's dead.

Life was taken away from Jungkook.

Jungkook was taken away from Taehyung.

Taehyung feels it, the way his heart sunders in half.

This time, Minsoo isn't here to save him.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

The rain ebbs to a light drizzle.

"Was it necessary?"

"It isn't my choice."

"I do not like this. I was promised they would come out alive."

"Alive? Yes."

Elder Miseon sighs. "Kaiya appears interested in them."

"Not in them. In the boy."

"Which boy?"

"The Devourer of Death. He's the first necromancer of his kind to enter Kaiya. I didn't even know one could speak to, raise, and pass the dead all at once. It's quite singular. "

"Necromancy is not inherently evil. It never was," Miseon says, who has caught onto the wariness surrounding her friend.

"Kaiya and its spirits appear to believe the same. I wonder how Donovan will feel around the Devourer of Death, if they survive this."

"This group *must* survive. It had taken weeks to extricate myself from my own. I thought… I thought only Jungkook would go through a Night Terror."

"It was the plan, however he was taken out of the river, and afterwards Kaiya could not isolate him again. I'm afraid *all* of them will have to withstand this now. Hopefully they'll succeed."

Miseon hopes so too. "What words were spoken to you?"

"Only one has been since you've entered."

"Which one?"

"Healing."

Elder Miseon frowns. "Healing?"

Another hum, low and raspy that follows a tune. The mist surrounding the column of bloody rain swirls, whistling along the lullaby.

Miseon surveys the group facing her.

All are passed out on the plaza, some laid down, others leaned against. They're drenched in the blood of the rain, the sight macabre. A shiver runs down her spine when she sees how their eyes are open, the pupil erratically darting in every direction.

A gasp tears through the stillness.

Jungkook coughs then springs up. He rapidly blinks as he looks around. "Taehyung?"

"Oh. How odd."

"Shouldn't he be comatose like the others?" Miseon wonders.

"He should be, unless it is part of his Night Terror."

A form flies past Miseon's head. It hovers above Jungkook, unseen by him. "So it *is* part of it, if he cannot see you."

"Aye."

The form comes back to Miseon to land on her shoulder.

"I've never seen Night Terrors like these before. Some appear to be connected."

"Which ones?" Miseon wonders.

"Dahee and Junhyun. Jimin and Yoongi, but also Jimin and Woobin."

Miseon makes a noise of surprise. "Not Taehyung and Jungkook?"

"The Night Terror of the Devourer of Death is connected with nearly everyone."

"This is worrisome…"

A snorted flame is all the answer Miseon gets.

Jungkook has gotten up by now and is walking toward Taehyung where he crouches next to. "Taehyung?" He grabs Taehyung's shoulders to shake him. "Taehyung. Tae. What's going on? Why is—" He looks around. "Why has everyone passed out? Taehyung? Storm. *Storm*."

Miseon feels bad for the boy, however she cannot help him. Kaiya wouldn't let it happen.

Jungkook walks toward Namjoon and Yoongi next. None of them answer him. He suddenly collapses on the ground at the center of the group, his eyes closed and now seemingly immersed in his nightmare.

A sigh elevates next to Miseon.

"It has begun."

“I worry.”

“Why? You told me they were a powerful bunch. They'll be fine if they truly are.”

“Even the strongest can become weak in the face of their nightmare.”

A scoff. “Aren’t you a poet.”

Miseon glowers at her friend.

“She, on the other hand, seems to have had no trouble overcoming her own. This might be the fastest breakout I've ever seen.”

Barely a few minutes have passed since the trials have begun, yet Yumi’s head raises from where she’s slumped against a tree.

Yumi’s gaze is alert as it darts around. Not a single blink tears through her as she whistles once. Her lizard pads toward her and promptly begins to sing. A translucent bubble forms around Yumi that shields her from the rain.

“You’re feeling alright?” Yumi asks her familiar. The latter nods.

Miseon freezes on her spot when Yumi’s eyes settle where Miseon and her friend are, even if Yumi can’t see them. Yumi peers at the group next, then at Jungkook.

She walks up to him.

Miseon has half a mind to intervene. She does not like this woman, let alone trust her around the unconscious group. She carefully observes the way Yumi picks up Jungkook’s book to sift through the empty pages.

Miseon’s gaze drops on the back of Yumi’s head. On the nape, more specifically.

There's a discolored patch of skin here. It looks dry and black, greyer on the edges of the mark. It’s hidden when Yumi pulls on the collar of her kimono.

“What could he be seeing?” Yumi hums. “I know it's not pleasant because it definitely wasn't for me. Do you have any idea?” She asks her lizard. The latter tilts its head. “I’ll need you to sing.”

The lizard whines.

Yumi pats its head. “Are you hungry?” The lizard nods. “Did any of you have a nightmare?” Her familiars must answer her because she bobs her head. “Although you are both always stuck in your own nightmare, aren’t you? Poor things..."

Yumi retrieves a dagger from her sleeve.

She unceremoniously severs two of her fingers that she catches before they fall. The lizard climbs down her head to settle on her forearm. Then, and in a way that Miseon grimaces at, Yumi feeds the two fingers to the lizard.

“The hell is wrong with that warlock?” Miseon’s friend spits.

“She is a necromancer as well.”

"You don't say. What is her arcane, more specifically?”

“I don’t know. No one does, it seems. All we know is that she has familiars and is a necromancer, a knowledge Jungkook himself has confirmed.”

“Heal the two fingers I gave you but don’t touch those Taehyung blasted off. Then let’s find out what Jungkook is going through so we can hopefully help him out,” Yumi instructs. "Hm? No. I don't really care about the others." The lizard makes a series of noises. "You ask a lot of questions about him today." The familiar ducks its head. "Keep your distance for the moment. Now, sing. You want to help him, and so do I."

The lizard sings, two of Yumi’s injured fingers growing anew.

“Can you soothe them through a lullaby? Maybe it’ll work.”

A peaceful melody rings in the air.

Miseon’s tenseness relaxes against her own will. A draconian curse erupts from where her friend is propped on her shoulder. “Should we do something? What if she tries to wound them? Or worse?”

“We can’t meddle with the Night Terrors.”

Miseon is aware of this, however she cannot help but worry the longer Yumi remains alone with the group. Yumi feeds her lizard again, this time with three more fingers that are healed minutes later.

Yumi retrieves one of her hair sticks that she uses to poke and probe at Taehyung, Hoseok, then at everyone else.

None of them budge.

Yumi hums to herself as she peers around. Her lizard nudges her chin. There must be some kind of lid at the end of her hair stick because she twists the end of it, the tip coming off. “Thank you. I forgot. It seems that the effect doesn't last as long here, huh? I've been feeling weird.” She tips her head back and lifts the hair stick to her mouth. Some liquid falls from the stick that seems to be more of a narrow tube.

The lizard climbs back atop Yumi's head as she shakes herself. “Always tastes so horrid. Make sure to tell me if you notice something about me again.” Yumi turns around.

The odd patch of skin is gone from her neck.

She plops down on the ground next to Jungkook. She leans closer to him. As Yumi’s hand hovers above Jungkook’s face, a certain sadness paints her face. “How lonely…” She brushes a strand of hair away from Jungkook’s forehead. “Necromancers are so lonely, aren’t we? No one to understand us, to accept us. No one like us. No friends, no fam—” She halts when the lizard jumps down on Jungkook’s chest. It curls in on itself there, seemingly falling asleep. “I suppose I do have you,” she whispers, her gaze drifting between her two familiars. “My family. But we are too few. A family should be… It should be greater. That’s what my father always told me. We’ll find new members soon, okay? It has been too long since the last one.”

Miseon’s attention darts away from Yumi when she catches some movement toward a tree where Dahee is leaning against.

Dahee's eyes are wildly shifting beneath her lids, and Miseon can tell the leader is about to break free from her Night Terror.

Yumi retracts her hand, seemingly unaware of the wakening dragonborn behind her.

Dahee startles awake.

Her breathing is labored and fast, but unconsciously kept as quiet as possible.

The vision of her family being taken away is fresh in her mind, wrenching at her heart as it had during Taehyung’s first abduction.

She observes the area and the relief that swarms her when she sees her family is dizzying. It’s however snatched back when she notices that everyone appears to be comatose.

“What does he even do with this book? I don't remember if he told me. He had it out the whole time but did nothing with it.”

Dahee's head swings to where the voice came from.

Yumi is sitting near Jungkook.

Dahee slowly rises to her feet. She draws her sword from its sheath. She approaches Yumi, quiet and stealthy. Her flames coat the blade Jimin had forged for her.

“You have two seconds to step away from my son-in-law.”

Yumi’s head swivels around as she drops Jungkook’s memory book. She smiles and stands, staring at the blade aimed at her throat. “Lady Dahee.”

“Two, o—”

Yumi leaps backward, hands raised in the air. “I’m away.”

Dahee briefly glances at Jungkook. “Is this your doing?”

“Nope. It’s the forest. Might be its spirits too.” Yumi points at the sky. “Remember the bloody rain? I started feeling weird when it began.”

Dahee glances at Jungkook. A flare of ire flashes in her at how unprotected Jungkook had been with Yumi. “What were you doing with his book?”

“I was trying to figure out a way to wake him up. I was stuck in some kind of nightmare.”

Dahee had been too, who still suppresses the lingering trembling in her limbs.

“I’m surprised you managed to get out of yours this fast. It must have been terrifying,” Yumi grins. “What was your nightmare about? Was it perhaps related to Taehyung’s abduction? Maybe your entire family was taken away. How did you get out of yours?”

Dahee remains impassive even if Yumi has hit the nail on the head. “I killed Dohyun. Then I had every single human, warlock and dragonborn that has worn, bought or sold my son’s scales and skin be tried at Bastille. I killed Seungwon next, and anyone that may have had a hand in my family’s abduction.”

“That must include me as well, doesn’t it?”

“Of course.”

“How unfortunate.”

“No. You’re the most fortunate warlock as we speak,” Dahee says, her timber raspy. “Would you like to know why?”

“Yes!”

“Because Dohyun is at the top of the beheading chain.”

“Is he?" Yumi says who looks infuriatingly unfazed. "Why did you not kill him at the Council? He was right there. I’m sure it would have been easy.”

Dahee’s nose furls up, her guts uncomfortably clenching. “I would have if I could, however as you may have come to notice, the Council does not hold Taehyung close to its heart. Not only would they have prevented me from killing Dohyun, but it could have also had dire consequences on my son. I could not afford that.”

“That’s fair. Still a missed chance though.”

“You say this as though this vile vermin had not been protected by you and other warlocks.”

“True. I’m still surprised you could show such restraint. I know I wouldn’t have,” Yumi shrugs. “Does that mean I’m safe then, if Dohyun is your priority?”

“Keep in mind that you’re only alive because you are useful to Jungkook, and because no matter how much I wish to see your blood grace my blade, Taehyung and Jungkook will be the one to decide when, and if, it must happen.”

“Fantastic,” Yumi exclaims and grins. “Now that the baseless threats are out of the way, what should we do?” She taps the hair sticks she’s holding against her lip. “My lizard sang a soothing song but it didn’t work even though it’s one of its most powerful lullabies.”

Dahee does not lower her sword. “Why were you helping him?”

“I want to.”

“Why?”

“I’m interested in him.”

“*Why?”*

“Why not?” Yumi’s gaze glints with amusement. “I enjoy keeping my kind close to me. If there is one thing you can believe from me, it’s that I do not wish any harm on Jungkook.”

Dahee slowly lowers her sword. She walks up to Jungkook. The tightness in her chest relents the slightest bit when she notices the lack of any apparent wound on him. She takes his book and goes through the pages. It appears intact as well.

“There was nothing in it."

Dahee ignores Yumi in favor of making her way toward her mate. She drops her sword while she kneels by his side.

Junhyun looks so unlike himself, too quiet, face knitted into a pained frown.

“Darling. My Darling.” Dahee gently cups his cheek, wiping away the sweat on his forehead. She hugs him against her chest, pressing a kiss atop his crown. “I am here, Darling. Taehyung and Jimin are too. We are safe. Kept safe by you, as always. You have always been strong and done so much for us. Thank you. I love you. We all do. I need you to come back to me.”

Dahee continues to murmur reassuring words in his ears as the minutes elapses, her gaze not straying away from Yumi who’s settled atop her boulder familiar.

Some gasps and coughs erupt a while later.

Dahee releases her hold around her mate to stand.

“Fuck,” Hoseok spits and shuffles on his knees. His gaze meets Dahee’s. “Wha— What the fuck’s going on?”

“I’m not certain,” Dahee answers. She crosses the distance to crouch in front of Hoseok. “Did you have a nightmare of some sort?”

“Yeah.” Hoseok wipes his mouth, his other hand clutching at his shirt. “Was fucking horrible.”

“I had one too. It seems that we are going through one of the challenges Elder Miseon had mentioned. Yumi has gone through something similar as well.”

“Yeah, that’s… That’s what I had to do.”

“Was living at Eden again in your nightmare?”

Hoseok averts his gaze, his head lowering.

It is all the answer Dahee needs, and this yearn to care for this boy flares in her.

Dahee pushes back Hoseok’s drenched hair then squeezes his shoulder. “You have done well, Hoseok. Wait.” She walks away to rummage through one of the supply bags they’ve brought with them. “Here,” she says once near Hoseok again. She hands him two sandwiches along with a bottle of water.

Hoseok’s shoulders slump, the tenseness in them relaxing. “Thank you.” He does not waste a second to begin devouring his food. “Asking again, what the hell is going on? Was it the rain? I was fine at first but the second it began, I started to be really hungry.”

“It may be due to the rain, yes. Perhaps the bell as well,” Dahee muses. "Or perhaps Jungkook's fall in the river? I'm not certain."

“Fuck,” Hoseok reiterates amidst a bite. “Anything we can do to help?”

“I don’t know. However we must keep an eye on Yumi. She had been near Jungkook when I woke up.”

Hoseok nods. “We just wait, then?”

“I believe it is all we can do for now.”

To Dahee’s relief, Junhyun is the next one to awaken, evidently shaken in her arms. They both settle near Taehyung and Jimin afterwards, watching their sons and praying for them to open their eyes soon.

Seokjin eventually wakes up, hands balled up into fists. The alarmed glower that etches his face is one that Dahee has never seen before on the joyful designer. Hoseok thankfully goes up to him, Dahee stepping aside to let the two men talk together as Hoseok rubs a palm between Seokjin’s shoulders.

Namjoon awakens as well and once up on his feet, he reaches for a necklace with a pendant of Amaris' emblem, repeating to himself in a mantra that he is employed at Amaris and working as the prince's page. Afterwards, he collects a flower then walks up to Yoongi to place it in Yoongi's palm.

Minsoo is still unconscious.

Dahee isn’t certain of what her father’s nightmare may be about, however an idea flickers in her mind when she's reminded of how Jungkook's arcane had seemingly burned her father.

She slashes her palm with her sword, then she retrieves from a pouch a vial containing an ointment infused with Minsoo’s healing breath. She slathers the ointment on her palm and she watches how the wound heals within a few minutes. She peers at her father.

Nothing.

Dahee does it again.

It’s at the fourth cycle of slashing and healing that Minsoo jerks awake with a series of expletives.

“Fucking hell.”

“Father! Father.” Dahee holds onto his shoulders as he sits upright. “Are you well?”

Minsoo spits some blood on the ground. “The hell was that?”

“The rain and bell. They must have put us in a trance and thrown us into a nightmare. Were you in one too?”

“That explains why I couldn’t use my healing breath anymore,” Minsoo mutters. “It was gone. Couldn’t heal you. Or the kids.”

“I had a feeling...” Dahee holds her father’s hand, squeezing it once. “You will always be able to care for us, Father. Always.”

Minsoo’s lips pinch. He lifts a hand to cup Dahee’s cheek, his palm warm. “Are you well, Firecracker?”

Dahee emits a small laugh at the nickname she hasn’t heard in years. “Yes, I am, Father. I managed to extricate myself from my nightmare. Quite a few of us have. Now we must wait for the others.”

Five hours have passed, and those unconscious have yet to extricate themselves of their nightmare.

“Jimin and Yoongi seem to be getting worse,” Dahee worries.

There isn’t much Hoseok has gotten to learn about love, however he has had the chance and misfortune to witness it. So Hoseok has noticed how close Jimin and Yoongi have become, and an idea flickers in his head.

He stands and walks up to the duo. It’s a shot in the dark, but he tries nonetheless. He takes Jimin’s hand and places it atop Yoongi’s, their palms pressed together and holding the flower Namjoon had given to Yoongi.

“Do you think they’ll feel it?” Namjoon wonders.

“I don’t know. But sometimes all you need is a helping hand,” Hoseok says, his thoughts trailing back to his nightmare, but also to his life before he had met Hyuna and then Seokjin.

Once done, he steps back and plops back down.

“Is this how you woke up from your nightmare?” Namjoon asks. “Thinking of a helping hand?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“That’s gentle. I think a lot of us have gone for more drastic options.”

Hoseok snorts. “I thought of flowers too,” he adds, memories of Hyuna’s arcanic plants floating in his mind. “Always those damn flowers.”

Yoongi’s gaze is the first thing that Jimin sees. Then it’s Yoongi’s small smile, crinkling the corners of his eyes. “Hey.”

Jimin blinks the tears clinging onto his eyelashes. He sees Kaiya’s forest behind Yoongi. Jimin does not speak, not feeling like doing so. Instead he clutches Yoongi's hand but stills when he feels something in their grasp.

He brings their hands up to their chests and glances down as their palms part open.

There's a tiny sunflower laying in Yoongi’s palm. It’s made from Jimin’s metal, he can tell, but he doesn’t remember ever sculpting a sunflower before.

Jimin meets Yoongi's gaze again.

“Are you alright?” Yoongi wonders.

Jimin nods. When Yoongi cups his face, Jimin doesn’t flinch. He remains still, heart beating in his throat. It’s scary. *He’s scared.* But he lets it happen. He even leans into the touch, the slightest bit, ever so wary. He's rewarded by Yoongi’s growing smile, and a *‘Thank you’* Yoongi murmurs.

“Are you okay?”

“M’fine.” It’s Woobin, his timber raspy.

Jimin’s head turns to peer at his brother.

Woobin’s knees are drawn up, arms wrapped around them, but it does nothing to temper the trembles that rake through his curled up form. Jimin peers at Yoongi.

“Go ahead.”

Jimin thinks back on his nightmare, on how the scenes where he'd fallen in love with Yeonho then been betrayed had replayed over and over in a heartwrenching loop before his eyes. Then he think of how Yoongi had broken the nightmare's patterns with his own scenes, how he'd brought sunflowers with him every time and gifted them to Jimin, how he'd held Jimin in arms when Jimin would cry, how it had all been fictitious, yet felt more real than anything with Yeonho.

“Thank you,” Jimin whispers after a beat, feeling stupid for how much he wants to say, yet how little he manages to utter.

Yoongi squeezes his hand. “Thank you too.” Jimin makes a sound of confusion. “You helped me in my nightmare.”

“Oh...”

“So thank you for that, and for…” Yoongi glances at his thumb that brushes Jimin’s temple before letting go. “And for this too.”

Jimin nods, struggling to swallow around the lump in his throat. He sits up, Yoongi following suit. Jimin leaves the sunflower with Yoongi when he retracts his hand. “What happened?”

Dahee gives him a run down of the situation.

Jimin surveys his brother, and he doesn't need to ask to know what Woobin's nightmare may have been about. He walks up to him, settling down by his side. "How did you get out of yours?"

"On my own," Woobin rasps. "Killed him."

The accusation is acute and aimed at Jimin. He doesn't argue against it. He had failed his brother, but he hopes to be given a second chance now to make things right. So Jimin tentatively reaches for his brother's wrist. He holds it, and he slowly coaxes the fingers to relent their tight grip around the legs. "You—"

"I want him dead. I *need* him dead or locked up for good."

"Woobin, we—"

"I don't care about forgiveness or forgetting. I can't— *I can't.* I can't live if he's alive and free. I can't live if I constantly have to look over my shoulder because I *know* he'll come find me. I know it. I'm tired." Woobin lowers his head to hide it against his knees, muffling his quiet cry. "I need him gone."

"I know." Jimin entangles his fingers with Woobin's. "I'll take care of it, alright? As… As I should have. I'm sorry."

Woobin makes an aborted hum.

"I've had an idea that I'll speak about with Jungkook and Yoongi. The Council never really believed anything we've told them about Seungwon, but with Jungkook's book and Yoongi's arcane…" Jimin peers at his brother when Woobin's head raises just enough for his blurry eyes to meet Jimin's. "He told me his book can store memories. We could store our regarding Seu— Regarding Father. I already mentioned this to Yoongi, and he also told me that he could prove to the Council that the memories they'd witness would be real and not fabricated. They'd have to believe us."

"And if they don't? What if he doesn't end up in jail? Then what?"

"Then Bastille will become my new home. Taehyung will probably join me," Jimin jests.

Woobin's distrust is evident, but he nods nonetheless. His hand is lax in Jimin's. "Taehyung hasn't woken up yet, neither did Jungkook. They're the only ones left."

Jimin observes Taehyung and Jungkook that are laid next to each other, their hands clasped together.

"I don't think the hand holding method will work for them like it did for you and Yoongi."

"They'll find a way out. I'm sure of it."

Ding… ding… ding…

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung can’t speak, feeling out of breath.

“Everything okay?”

The throne Jungkook had been sitting on is pristine now, when it had been half destroyed and covered in blood minutes earlier.

“Did… Did we die? Are we dead?”

“Mh? You haven’t been sleeping well lately. Nightmares again?”

“My heart broke. I felt it again.”

“Why would it?”

“Because you died.”

“I’m alive and well, Taehyung. You have healed, so have I. We both have for a while. Years.”

“But—” Taehyung still remembers how cold and stiff Jungkook’s hand had been. “You—”

“It’s alright. You’ll remember everything soon. It still happens from time to time after… After everything. It’s alright. Here.” Jungkook presents a cup to Taehyung. “You should drink this. It will help.”

Taehyung does. Maybe it will.

“Now, let us bask in the spectacle.”

When Taehyung hands the glass cup to Jungkook, it’s gone from his fingers, replaced by Jungkook’s cold ones. Taehyung doesn’t need to look to know that Jungkook is dead. He stills looks at him anyway, and uneasiness flares in Taehyung because the man he’s looking at *is* Jungkook, yet it isn’t at the same time.

This Jungkook is cold and ashen and quiet.

Taehyung yanks his hand out of Jungkook’s grasp. He pushes himself up on his throne’s armrest, however his palms slip on the blood coating the velvet. He nearly topples forward but catches himself just in time.

The ground is odd. It isn’t the solid cobblestone he expects. It’s soft.

Taehyung looks down.

He’s half standing on Jimin’s chest. The latter’s eyes are open but devoid of any life. Hoseok’s corpse is beneath Jimin. Taehyung sees his mother occupying the space under Jungkook’s throne,

one of the feet stabbed through her chest. Junhyun is here too, along with Kija, Seokjin, and everyone else.

The thrones are resting atop a pile of corpses.

All at once, Taehyung feels like a child again, and when he peers down, he can see himself in a smaller body. There's blood and burnt marks on his tiny fingers, like there used to be when he hadn't been able to control his breaths. Some of the blood is hardened.

"Mom? Mom." Taehyung moves forward but his shoes slip on something and he falls on his rear. He scrambles on his knees and crawls over the bodies to reach his mother. "Mom," he croaks out, eyes stinging. "What's— What's going on? Mom."

A crack erupts behind him.

It's trailed by a smell of rot and grim.

Taehyung's head slowly turns around.

Jungkook is kneeled behind Taehyung, his face is a few inches away from Taehyung's. His eyes are as dead as everyone else's. They don't light up when the mouth quirks upward, the lips dried and blue. "You didn't save me," the voice rasps. "Us."

"No, I—"

Taehyung tries to shuffle away from Jungkook, however his hands slide on blood once more and before he realizes it, he tumbles down the heap of corpses.

He falls face first into some kind of puddle, some of its content going into his mouth. He doesn't get to wonder what it is, nor why it tastes so metallic. He's twisted on his back. His gaze darts on Jungkook, the latter standing above him.

Jungkook crouches. His bones crack when he does, some of the skin tearing but not spilling any blood. His bony hand extends toward Taehyung, some of the rings adorning it falling into the water. The wedding ring remains, however.

"Weak."

"Jungk—"

Jungkook's fingers wrap around Taehyung's throat. It squeezes and drags him closer to Jungkook's face, the breath putrid. Taehyung's hands fly to Jungkook's, his own back to those of his adult self. He pulls and clenches to dislodge the suffocating fingers, however any sliver of strength Taehyung may have is sapped out of him by the sight of his dead husband, by the heap of the corpses of Taehyung's family and people.

"Weak." The fingers tighten their grip, the nails biting at Taehyung's skin. "You killed us."

Taehyung feels it more than he sees it, the way he's slammed into the puddle and submerged in it. It isn't as much of a puddle as it is a pool of blood now.

Jungkook lets go as Taehyung sinks and drowns.

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung coughs, expecting to expel some of the blood that had filled his lungs but his mouth is dry.

“Everything okay?”

“Everyone died. Everyone’s dead.”

“Mh? You haven’t been sleeping well lately. Nightmares again?”

The same conversation occurs. He drinks the concoction Jungkook gives him, and a veil of darkness befalls the area.

There’s a bright light that blinds him, a fire that bursts in the air.

Ahead of him, Jungkook is kneeling, his hands tied behind his back. Jungkook’s gaze finds Taehyung, fear washing over his face. His mouth opens but a gurgling sound comes out of it when a spear pierces through his chest.

“T—Taehyung,” Jungkook croaks out. “Why… Why aren’t you helping? We can’t… Without you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. We’ll heal you and—”

Jungkook’s body falls limp.

Blood drowns the area anew.

“Taehyung? Everything okay?”

“I’m protecting my people. My family. You."

“How could you? When you couldn’t protect yourself from Dohyun?” Jungkook laughs, callous and mean. “When fear consumes you.”

“It… It doesn’t as much anymore.”

“Yet we still died. We are. You should protect us. You *need* to. Why is that?”

“Because I’m a chaos dragon. Because my arcane is better. Greater. More than everyone else's. I have to protect you.”

"It *is* true, isn't it? We're weaker than you," Jungkook says but the words feel wrong.

Would he really say this? Jungkook has always been so resilient and resourceful.

"I have died many times without you. Watch," Jungkook rasps. "We are weak, Taehyung."

They are, aren't they?

This certainty wavers, however. It doesn't feel quite right, but it does make sense when the view before him veers to the one of the manor. Instead of raising an army of unknown undead, Jungkook raises an army of Vanae's people and Taehyung's family.

Jungkook dies minutes later.

Taehyung continues to witness the death of his family. Each time, they can't protect themselves, and when Taehyung finally arrives to do it himself, it's too late.

"Taehyung? Everything okay?"

Taehyung always had to hold back for as long as he can remember. He had to be mindful of his strength, of the potency of his arcane so as to not accidentally kill anyone, even more when he had been younger.

It makes sense that only he is able to protect those he loves.

"My chaos can protect you."

"I abhor your chaos, like everyone else does. As it should be. It corrupts the mind, makes one mad…"

Taehyung stills at this. He peers at Jungkook, the two of them sitting in their thrones. "You don't hate it. That's not tru—"

"I do. I have since the very first day."

"I felt so serene when I saw you rip the sky open. I'm very fond of your chaos, Tae."

"You said you love my chaos."

"I never have."

"You did. You—" Taehyung clutches at his head when screams ring between his ears. "You do. Stop— Stop lying."

Jungkook has never been scared of Taehyung’s chaos, right? It can’t be. He's no coward.

The bloody rain falls anew.

The vision this time mingles with the one of Amaris and Vanae’s people dying, however something is off about it.

“Taehyung? Everything okay?”

Plops and crackles flicker around Taehyung.

“Do you consider yourself weak?”

“Yes,” Jungkook’s corpse answers.

It’s wrong.

It rings true in Taehyung’s ears, yet he can’t shake off the sense that it isn’t right.

Has Jungkook ever been this helpless?

The same Jungkook that had headbutted and snarked back at Taehyung since the very first day. The same one that had raised the dead to save himself and Taehyung. It had been Jungkook, then, who had been this mighty driving force.

The more Taehyung thinks about it, the more uncanny it is to hear Jungkook describe himself as weak. Jungkook is power in so many different forms, so many meanings.

The scene changes, abrupt.

This time, Dahee is the one crying out for help. Jimin follows suit, then Junhyun, all seeming so hopeless.

Weak.

But even then, they shouldn’t die so easily. They wouldn’t, wouldn’t they?

“We would,” Jungkook assures, his timber becoming more and more strange. “We will. Over and over again.”

“You wouldn’t die so easily.”

“How would you know? We are.”

Taehyung’s family fights but loses and dies. It makes sense. They aren't chaos dragons. They don’t have a tenth of the power Taehyung’s arcane withhold. They shout out Taehyung’s name, because they must know protection will only be given from him.

Taehyung's mother cowers. Jimin runs away. Hoseok curls in on himself while Seokjin cries out in anguish. They're scared. Of course they are. Taehyung isn't here to save them.

Ah… A voice whispers in Taehyung's mind, familiar. *Everyone else is so, unbearably, weak.*

"We are," Jungkook agrees.

Or is it really Jungkook? Taehyung isn't so certain anymore.

"No." Jungkook springs up.

Taehyung's thoughts halt as he watches his mother hurl a fireball at an opponent that burns to ashes. More enemies arrive. Dahee attempts to fight them off along with the rest of the family, but they die anyway.

A new battle begins.

Jungkook sighs and sits back down. "As I thought," he chuckles, strained. "They need you."

Taehyung's family and people will lose. They're outnumbered. Taehyung isn't here. They'll lose, and yet….

Yet, Taehyung watches how they all slowly gain the upper hand. There are roars, breaths of fire and metal and wind, of ice and more swirling around. They're fending off the enemies.

A click of tongue.

Jungkook looks furious as he stares at the field. He produces a bow from somewhere, then an arrow. He rises to his feet and aims. The arrow whistles through the air to lodge itself between Junhyun's eyes.

Taehyung grips onto his throne. "Stop."

"Why? We are weak, aren't we? We aren't supposed to win."

"But they are."

"They shouldn't. You aren't here."

More arrows are shot, each one killing a member of the family, and they lose the fight.

"Why—" Taehyung's head turns to glare at Jungkook, however the latter is gone. In his stead, Taehyung sees himself holding the bow.

"They can't survive without you. Us," the Taehyung says, his voice so alien.

"They can. They were."

"Were they?"

Taehyung's family is held captive now. However Hoseok breaks himself free from his bindings, soon doing the same with everyone else.

A new loop starts.

The other Taehyung prepares his bow, about to fire it at Jungkook who's winning a fight against several opponents.

Taehyung stands and rushes at his other self, the two of them tumbling to the ground. Taehyung pins himself on the ground. The arrow has been fired. It narrowly misses Jungkook's head.

"They are weak."

Taehyung punches his other self in the face when the latter tries to throw him off of him. He dodges the fist that comes his way and lays a second punch in return, then a third and a fourth.

"Your f—family is weak," the other Taehyung stammers amidst the flurry of punches. "Your people are weak." He laughs, maniacal. "Only us can save them. You've seen it for yourself, how greater we are. It's why we've been isolated from the rest of our peers, why they fear us. *Venerate* us. We're not like the rest of them. They need us. Me."

It's not true.

Taehyung's head smacks against the floor when his other self succeeds in pushing him off. The other Taehyung fires an arrow that finds its way through Jimin's shoulder. Jimin falls to the ground. He's about to be killed by a man's sword that lifts above his neck, however he rolls out of the way, the sword boring into the ground.

A billow of wind and blood obscures Taehyung's view.

The loop is different.

Now, Taehyung sees Jungkook as a child, chained up to a sink's pipe. *Weak,* someone viciously rasps. However Jungkook uses a hairpin to break himself free, his gaze swimming with a fierce yearn to live. Next is Jimin and Yeonho's aftermath, however Yoongi is here, and Jimin who had looked so heartbroken grins at Yoongi. In another scene, Dahee leads the searches when in this one Taehyung and Jimin are both abducted. Meanwhile, Junhyun forms an alliance with a neighboring nation that had once been a rival.

Taehyung watches as power in all of its forms are displayed before him.

Without him.

The arrows the other Taehyung shoots seem to ricochet now, never quite piercing through anyone anymore.

"They can't without us," the other Taehyung snarls when another fight is won against Seohyung's army. "They can't handle *anything.* It's why you've been lying to them. S'why we haven't told them. 'Cause they're fucking weak."

But it's not true, isn't it?

They don't need Taehyung.

The other Taehyung is about to send another arrow, however Taehyung trips him down once more. He straddles him, his fist coming down once on the cheekbone.

"Let me go! We have to save them! They're weak!"

“They aren’t.”

“They are compared to *me,* ” the other Taehyung snarls. "Worthless. Beneath us. Can't handle the truth. Y—You shouldn't tell them. They'll die if they know. Jimin will. Mom will. And Jungkook wi—"

Taehyung wrenches his self's throat, squeezing and squeezing as the other Taehyung wrestles in the grip. Taehyung’s vision blurs more and more as he strangles his other self. He frees one of his hands to grab an arrow laying near him.

He glances one last time to the side.

His family and people have won. They’re celebrating over a feast, laughing, smiling.

Alive.

Taehyung peers at his other self below him. His arm raises, fingers tightened around the arrow.

“Stop! They’ll die without me! They’re weak! They’re weak, weak, weak—”

Taehyung swings down.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

Taehyung’s hand flies to his left eye. When he peers at the palm, there’s no blood in it.

“Taehyung!”

Taehyung grunts when a burden weighs down on him. “You’re fucking heavy.”

Jimin moves away. “We’ve been waiting for you to wake up.”

“What… Is this real?” Taehyung wonders as he sits up, Kaiya’s forest surrounding him. “What happened?”

Jimin explains about the challenge and nightmare, adding that everyone has managed to escape their own.

Taehyung surveys the group that has handled the issue on their own. He thinks back on what his other self had told him, and a deep sense of shame sinks within Taehyung.

His family isn’t weak.

“Only Jungkook is left.”

Taehyung’s gaze darts on Jungkook who's laying by his side. He’s hesitant when he holds Jungkook’s hand, but it’s warm and soft.

Taehyung exhales a shaky sigh.

“We don’t know what to do to get Jungkook out of his nightmare,” Namjoon says, brows furrowed. “He seems deeply lost in it.”

“It’ll be alright,” Taehyung says with a newfound certainty. “He’ll wake up.”

He'll come back to me.

Ding… ding… ding…

The palpitations of Jungkook’s heart speed up as he watches those that have become his family be unresponsive, no matter how much he calls out for them to wake up. Jungkook folds his legs under him, hands gripping onto his pants.

He doesn’t know what to do.

And he’s alone, but not quite.

Jungkook has never been scared of lost souls before, however now a cold sweat creeps down his back when he catches some intelligible whispers here and there.

The rain grows heavier, but it's lessened by the fog that seemingly tries to shield Jungkook from it. The murmuring mist curls around his forearm and pulls him toward Yoongi where Jungkook is sitting in front of. "What is it?"

The mist dissipates.

Jungkook wants to help Yoongi first, but he's clueless on where to start. He clasps his trembling hands together.

A rustle of pages drifts in the air.

Jungkook peers at his necromancy book on the ground.

It has been flipped open by some of his flames that push the cover aside. It slowly turns the pages, then it sifts through it more rapidly, so fast that some of the pages rip apart, one of them nipping at his face.

His flames hover above a double page. They liquefy, and soon drops fall on the empty pages, becoming an ink that shifts across the paper. It writes words, some that Jungkook remembers having scribbled down when he had been younger.

Whispers echo the writing. They're agitated. Scared.

Jungkook brings a hand to his hip to retrieve his dagger. He shuffles away from the book then lowers to a crouch.

More writing appears in the pages, growing less and less decipherable. The rain seeps through the paper, turning the pages redder by the minute as the arcane in the drops mingle with Jungkook's and the book's.

This eerie sense of being watched rings a series of alarm bells in Jungkook's mind. He can't tell who or what it is, if it is a foe or an ally, if it is dead or alive. What he is certain of, however, is that it comes from his book.

" *Careful.* "

Jungkook's flames coil around the book. They lift it in the air, then tip it to the side. The ink spills from the pages into a black pool on the ground.

Jungkook braces himself. His grip tightens around his dagger.

The pool of ink and raven flames widens and widens.

Then, a hand peeks through it, equally black.

Something grazes past his nape, raising agitated goosebumps there. The rain is more virulent now, forcing Jungkook to shield his face with an arm but it isn't enough because he's thrown backward by a particularly violent gust.

Jungkook tumbles and springs up seconds later.

An entirely black figure emerges out of the pool, dripping ink when it braces itself on the grass. The rain slowly washes away the ink, revealing skin beneath the humanoid shape. There's no soul in the chest area.

Jungkook is silent when he rushes toward the thing, listening to the urgency carried by the mist. He draws his arm backward. He's about to blindly slash forward when a voice rises behind him.

"They're the same as mine."

Jungkook's heart stutters. A chill runs down his spine as everything comes to a halt around him.

The voice is small and hesitant. It's young and familiar, one that Jungkook would recognize amongst any other.

Jungkook's head slowly turns around.

A boy stands behind him.

His hair is black and neatly styled, dressed in a perfectly fitted suit that is too adult looking for a little boy. He has a scar on his shoulder, the ink cleaned by the bloody rain. Jungkook immediately knows that the boy is 9 years old, and that from the color of the scar, the boy has received it a few days ago. On his birthday, to be exact.

More notably, the boy has tattoos covering his arms. His eyes are jet black.

“May we sit?” The boy asks.

Jungkook dumbly nods. He lowers on his knees.

The boy walks forward and settles down, a mirror of the way Jungkook is sitting. “It smells good here. I like the smell of blood.” He pauses, alarm evident on his face. “But you can’t tell anyone, or Mother will be angry,” he rushes to say. “She doesn’t like it when I say things like this.” His hands ball up into fists. “And then I’m in the bathroom, and it’s scary. I don’t like it.”

Jungkook doesn’t understand what is happening. He exhales through his mouth and looks down. “I like the smell of blood too.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Clanks of chains can be heard, all too familiar. He shudders. “It smells metallic, sometimes sugary too. I enjoy it. It’s… It’s okay to like it.”

“I don’t know…" Another clatter of metal. "Mother says it’s bad.”

“She’s wrong. She always is.”

“Okay… If you say so.”

“You look a lot like me.”

Jungkook holds his breath then releases it. His head raises after a beat, and his gaze settles on the boy. “What’s your name?”

“Jungkook! Amaris’ Prince,” The boy grins proudly. “You don’t know about me? Everyone knows about me. I’m really famous. Mother says famous people are the most important people, but there’s a grandmother that I really like. She’s not famous at all, but she’s important to me.”

“Because she gives you candies,” Jungkook says at the same time as the boy says “Because she gives me candies.”

“Yes!” The boy curls in on himself and ducks his head. It wasn’t an exclamation, per se, but his voice had been louder than before, enough to startle himself. “My apologies. I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

Jungkook blinks away the sudden sting in his eyes. He can feel the glance the boy throws on him, the wariness that coats it, and Jungkook knows that the boy is actively searching for any sign of a shift of mood in Jungkook. Of anger. So Jungkook relaxes his tense shoulders.

Jungkook clears his throat and says “Is it alright if I call you Kookie?”

The boy muffles a chuckle in his palm. “Yes. Joonie calls me like this.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t know why I’m here. Do you know?”

Jungkook shakes his head. “You’re—” He wants to explain, but he’s not certain on why and how this is happening. “I believe you’re an important memory.”

“A memory? Of who?”

“Me.”

“Are you me?” Kookie asks, ever so clever. Jungkook nods, and Kookie emits a mute *‘Oh’*. “Isn’t it bad for me to know you’re me? One of my handlers read a book to me about something like this,” Kookie says and Jungkook had never realized how eerily well he used to speak when younger, forced to grow too soon. “Are you from the future?”

Jungkook chuckles weakly. “No, it isn’t bad, and no, not quite. You’re a memory. You already existed.”

Kookie tilts his head. “I don’t think I understand.”

“It’s alright. I’m still confused as well.”

Kookie clasps his hands together. The cuffs around his wrists clank when he does, the skin red there.

Jungkook’s heart twists. “Can I hold your hand?”

“Oh— Huh.” Kookie fidgets, picking at his cuticles. His mouth parts open then closes a few times. “I don’t like holding hands,” he confesses, so quietly that if it wasn’t for the silence around them, Jungkook wouldn’t have heard him. “It always hurts.”

“You’ll find people who hold your hand without making it hurt.”

“Do you think so?”

“I promise.” Jungkook thinks of all the time he had held Taehyung’s hand, and he smiles. “Some hands are warm and gentle, they’ll take care of you.”

“How do you know when someone takes care of you?”

“You—” Jungkook bites down on his lower lip, his throat clogging up. “It’s when they’re kind to you and listen to you. They want to help you, take care of your needs. They give you patience and affection and lo—”

“Affection?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s when… It’s when someone expresses their love for you through gentle touches, words and attention,” Jungkook explains but he can tell that Kookie is confused. “They hold your hand but it

doesn't hurt. They give you kisses, hugs and gifts. They tell you you've done well, that they're proud of you."

"Oh. Okay." Kookie looks to the side. "I don't think Mother likes affection with me. Father too."

"Other people will. You'll meet them."

"I hope so. It sounds nice…" Kookie peers down at his cuffed wrists. "May I hold your hand, please?"

Jungkook immediately extends his hand. He's slow and gentle when he holds Kookie's small hand with his own. He doesn't apply any pressure, even if he'd mean well. Instead his fingers are lax, barely holding. Kookie feels tangible, like an actual person in front of Jungkook, even if there are still some patches of ink on his skin and clothes, some drops trickling down.

They remain like this for a while, the two of them quiet.

Kookie tightens his fingers around Jungkook's at some point and says "I think I like holding hands."

Jungkook emits a wet chuckle. "Yes?"

Kookie nods, his lips ever so slightly curved. "You don't hurt me… I like this place."

"Why?"

Kookie peers at Namjoon then at Yoongi and the rest of the group surrounding them. "It feels like I know everyone here."

"You will."

"Are they nice?"

"The most."

Kookie nods again. "I feel weird."

"How so?"

"You know, usually my heart beats fast. And I often feel like I almost trip even if I'm not tripping. And I'm always cold too. I'm not cold here."

"You aren't?"

Kookie shakes his head. "I feel so warm… Like it's okay to talk. Or to look at you. Mother always says I shouldn't look people in the eye, and that I shouldn't talk too much unless asked to."

Jungkook's gaze meets Kookie's.

"This is weird," Kookie squirms on his spot and shuffles closer to Jungkook. "My head is so quiet… Usually it's really loud. I talk a lot in my head because I have to be sure I'm good and that I don't make people angry."

“Are you worried about making me angry?”

“I’m not, but I should be, 'cause it’s not normal. I— I don’t know if I like this.” Kookie takes his hand out of Jungkook’s grasp. “Maybe I’m sick but I can’t be sick. I have work today with Mother.” He rubs a hand on his forehead. “My chest feels warm. I think I’m sick.”

“You’re not sick. Everything’s alright.”

“I don’t know.”

Jungkook makes a move to reach out for Kookie but he stops himself before he does. “There’s a word for what you’re feeling.”

“There is? Is it a new sickness?”

“It’s not.”

“What’s the word?”

“Safety.”

Kookie stills. His eyes dart across Jungkook’s face, his lips parting before pinching into a thin line.

“You feel safe. The warmth, the feeling of being able to be and say whatever you want. It’s safety.”

Kookie blinks fast, lips wobbling. “Okay,” he mumbles. “This feels really nice.” The tears fall, washing away some of the blood and ink. “I like it. I really like it. I don’t want to go back. Don’t make me go back, please.”

“You won’t,” Jungkook lies to his memory.

“I don’t want to go back to Mother,” Kookie quietly says, wiping his eyes. “I’m scared.”

“You won’t, okay? You’ll be away from her.”

“Sorry. Princes don’t cry.”

“Why not?” Jungkook smiles. “You can if you want to. You should.” He ignores his own tears to carefully pull Kookie on his lap and embrace the boy in a gentle hug. Kookie doesn’t move, as though he doesn’t know how to hug someone back, but he silently cries against Jungkook’s chest, shoulders shaking.

“I don’t want to… To not feel safety again. I like feeling safety. I don’t want to go.”

“You’ll always feel safe. These people around us…” Jungkook leans back to glance down at Kookie then at their family surrounding them. “You’ll meet them in the future. They’ll be kind to you. They’ll love you so, *so much* you’ll drown in it and you’ll be so happy and loved. Free.”

“I’ll find a home?”

Jungkook’s breath is snatched out of him.

The freedom he has been basking in, the warmth and bliss of being around everyone, their love that he has slowly allowed himself to believe in and appreciate. It all comes down to one single thing.

Jungkook has found a home.

In Vanae and its arcanic forest. In Dahee, Junhyun, Jimin, but also in Seokjin and Hoseok.

Then, in Taehyung, where Jungkook has built his most precious haven.

Jungkook embraces his younger self again. Something in him that had been broken mends itself with the stitches of the memories he has created in Vanae.

“You’re gonna be brave for a little longer, alright? It’ll be scary, and sometimes it’ll hurt, but it’ll be worth it. I promise you.”

Kookie hums and nods. “Then I’ll have a home?”

“Then you’ll have a home.”

Plop. Plop. Plop.

“The book!”

Jungkook’s memory book swings open on its own, sifting through the pages. Ink swirls in them, erratic and unreadable.

Taehyung grabs it but drops it back down when it burns his hands. “Shit.”

The group surrounds the book whose pages soon all turn black, the book opened at the center. Some pieces of white appear here and there in the pages, but erased by the ink seconds later. However Taehyung can make out what it draws.

“Is that a room? It looks like walls,” Woobin observes, crouched near Taehyung but still at a certain distance.

Taehyung has half a mind to dismiss him, but instead he says “It is.”

“It looks like an empty room.”

Taehyung agrees with a hum. He turns one of the pages, discarding the way it singes the pulp of his fingers. On the next page, the room is more visible amidst the ink. There aren’t any doors or windows in it. He turns another page. A window can be seen in one of the four walls. Then, at the next one, a padlock is attached to the window’s lock.

Taehyung continues to turn the pages, the dark ink constantly shifting like a living entity. It draws the bathroom, but also the vague shape of what seems to be a face. The face becomes a body, then two, one taller than the other. The large figure's head is scratched over.

"Taehyung, your han—"

"I'm fine." Taehyung ignores the pain. The pages become more and more clear as he combs through them. The book burns him, but instead of feeling as such, it's more as though the book gnaws at his flesh, blood dripping in the pages and blending with the ink.

"Is this a lock on the window?" Junhyun wonders with barely contained ire.

"Yeah," Yoongi says. "Seohyung."

He doesn't need to expand more.

"Are we witnessing some of his memories?"

"Seems like it," Yoongi confirms. "This is probably Seohyung." He points at the figure with the scraped off head. "The boy must be him."

"It's empty."

"Where?"

Jimin points at the boy's chest where a white, barren pocket is amidst the ink, right where a heart would be.

Another memory forms. The boy is laid down on some kind of bed or long chair. There are bindings to his wrists and ankles. Three other figures frame him, including the one with the scratched head. Taehyung remembers having a similar memory before when he and Jungkook had visited Amaris together.

Yumi hums as she pets the lizard that is also looking at the book. "How odd."

Taehyung peers at her. "What is?"

Yumi glances at him. She smiles and walks away to lay on the grass.

Taehyung turns a new page, using his healing breath to mitigate the wounds.

The boy's chest and head make up the whole double pages, him and the background a cluster of erratic, messy lines and moving scribbles. The empty chest is still there, however when Taehyung leans closer to the book, he catches something new.

There are some faint lines on the hole. The edges are wobbly, others sharper, and a few more with some kind of round spot protruding on a side. They're more like sockets, as though something could be placed inside. Almost like a—

"Puzzle," Taehyung blurts out.

"What?"

“It looks like a puzzle. Where the heart is. But it’s missing pieces, with a larger one at the center. It has to be related to his nightmare,” Taehyung explains.

“What could it be about, though?”

“I'm not sure."

“How many pieces are there?”

Taehyung counts. “Nine for certain, but there may be more whose edges are a bit erased, or rather not fully formed.”

As if they haven’t been created yet, Taehyung muses to himself.

Ding… ding… ding…

“‘Kay,” Kookie sniffles. “I want to protect my home.”

“Me too, but I— I don’t know how. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“We have to wake them up.”

“Let’s find a solution together.” Jungkook stands and helps Kookie to his feet.

They start with Yoongi as he, himself, may aid the other to wake up. They shake Yoongi’s shoulders, call out his name, but Yoongi doesn’t respond. Jungkook had thought that Kookie touching Yoongi could have worked, but nothing.

Jungkook walks away from Kookie who’s trying to wake up Namjoon now. Jungkook walks into the mist, unable to see anything for a minute as he walks straight ahead without turning.

He appears in the plaza again a while later, the group still comatose.

Jungkook sighs. “We can’t get out of there. The mist will lead us back here.”

“Maybe we should try with him?” Kookie says and points at Taehyung.

Jungkook nods, the two of them settling next to the unconscious dragonborn.

“Taehyung?” Jungkook tries.

“Taehyung, may you wake up, please?”

When it leads to nothing, they try to shake awake someone else, then another person. The more they try, the more upset the whispers grow, the more ink covers Kookie and leaves puddles behind when he walks.

Kookie stares at Jungkook, the two of them facing each other. “You said I’d find my home.”

“Yes, and—”

“You said I would.” Kookie’s face pinches, eyes brimming with unshed and dark tears.

“You will, we—”

“Then why aren’t they waking up?” Kookie cries, black rivulets tracing his cheeks. “Wake them up.”

Jungkook attempts to once more. With Yoongi and Namjoon, then Taehyung and Jimin. Dahee is next, the fierce yet loving woman remaining out cold.

“Wake up, please,” Jungkook begs, his fingers trembling.

“You lied,” Kookie yells, his small fists punching Jungkook’s chest. “You lied! I don’t have a home!”

“You do.” Jungkook wants to hold Kookie’s arms but he jerks back when the cuffs are back on Kookie's wrists, one of the chains smacking the back of Jungkook's hand and cutting at the skin.

“You lied! You lied to me!”

“We just— Just need to wake them up. They’ll—” Jungkook halts.

The forest is gone.

It’s replaced by the bathroom, the latter devoid and dark.

Everyone is gone.

“Liar! Liar, liar liar!”

“I’m not…” Jungkook plasters his hands over his ears when the word echoes around him. He looks for anyone else that may be with him but he’s alone. He tries to talk to Revna, but no answer comes. A deep sense of void sinks within the left side of his chest.

“You liedI don’t have a home!”

“We do! I have a home! I have a home. They’re my home,” Jungkook mumbles to himself, his eyes wide and seeing nothing. “Maybe—” A thud erupts in front of him. His memory book is there. He falls to his knees and snatches it. “Maybe we have to give something. Maybe they’ll come back then.”

“No one’s here. We’re alone,” Kookie says but his voice is weird. It’s higher-pitched yet deeper. More adult and feminine.

“I’m gonna find something. I’ll give them something and they’ll come back to me.”

“Oh, dear,” a voice says.

“You poor, foolish pest.”

A callous chuckle trails after it.

“The likes of you are not worthy of a home.”

The voice speaks *and speaks* and it does not stop.

Jungkook curls in on himself, unable to repress the shivers that run through his form. His throat burns as though he’s screaming but he can’t hear anything. Only the voice.

“Your place is by my side. You are mine to use as I see fit, bastard child. That is your sole purpose. That is your place in this world. Do you understand?”

Plop. Plop. Plop.

Taehyung can feel Jungkook’s arcane and feelings that somehow seep through him in a thin, frail thread. Taehyung can’t put words on what Jungkook’s nightmare may be about. However something in him understands it, as though delineating the notes of a lullaby only he can hear.

An idea ignites in Taehyung, born from this certainty that he can’t pin-point the origin of. But it is there and unyielding.

“I need a quill,” Taehyung demands. He grabs the one Yoongi hands to him, feeling in a trance. “The book can store memories.”

“It can,” Yoongi says.

“But if a memory is stored inside, we still remember it, right? It’s not gone.”

“Usually, yes," Yoongi confirms, "but I’m not sure if it’d be the case here. Kaiya’s arcane is tampering with the one in the book, and everyone else’s arcane. I’m sure you’re feeling it too.”

Taehyung does in the way the breaths in his pouch want to be let out for no reason, as though beckoned by the forest. “I need everyone to think of an important memory you have of Jungkook. Choose one you’d be willing to lose if it’s gone from our mind. It *has* to be a memory you cherish with Jungkook, no matter what it may be. Think of specific words related to it that you’ll be writing in the book.”

Taehyung has never been more sure of anything in his life. He knows what Jungkook needs, what the pieces of the puzzle may represent. Everything still feels out in the open since they’ve bled each

other in the field, and it grows even more now.

“I… Yeah. That’s a good idea,” Yoongi nods. “Let’s try that.”

“And if it doesn’t wor—”

“It will,” Taehyung cuts off.

“Alright,” Namjoon says, evidently dubious.

“Oh! I know which one,” Jimin exclaims.

“Me too,” Dahee smiles.

They all sit around the book.

Yoongi is the first one to take the quill that he dips in one of the puddles of ink that had fallen from the book.

Ding… ding… ding…

“We’re not supposed to be outside.”

Jungkook pauses when he hears Yoongi’s voice. He lifts his head. The scenery has changed again, from Kaiya to the bathroom, it is now displaying the entrance of Amaris’ forest surrounding the citadel.

There’s a younger self speaking to a younger Yoongi.

“*You don’t want to be outside?”*

“I... I always want to be out,” Yoongi mutters.

“Then let’s go out.”

“Seohyung won’t like this.”

“She doesn’t have to know, okay? I have a friend who helps me, and she said no one is around, so we can go out,” Memory-Jungkook assures. *“You didn’t go out in a while, no? You were working.”*

Yoongi nods.

Jungkook feels a foreign relief swarm him as the duo walks into the forest. The sentiment isn’t his own, neither is the happiness that slowly peeks out.

“Thank you,” Yoongi says.

“You’re welcome,” Memory-Jungkook smiles. *“If we get caught, I’ll say it’s my fault so you won’t get punished. I’ll be punished anyway. So.”*

“There’s no need to. I can handle—”

“I want to help. I can help. I know Seohyung isn’t nice with you. She isn’t with anyone.”

Jungkook experiences a gratefulness as the two boys sneak out to the forest.

Yoongi looks happy. Yoongi *is* happy. Jungkook is able to feel it. Yoongi holds Jungkook’s hand to pull him toward a flower. Kookie tenses but relaxes, realizing that the hold isn’t painful.

The memory blurs then fizzles out, leaving Jungkook alone once more.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

A piece of the puzzle colors in a light green.

“It’s working. It’s fucking working,” Yoongi blurts out then stares at Taehyung. “How did you know?”

“I just did. The memory?”

“It’s gone,” Yoongi frowns. “I don’t remember what I gave him.”

Taehyung holds the ruby of Jungkook’s necklace in his palm. “Revna? Do you want to give a memory to Jungkook? You can come out for a few minutes.” When Revna does not come out, he says "Revna? Is everything alright?" He peers at Yoongi. "Is there any way to know if she's inside the ruby?"

"Not really. Only Jungkook can talk to her."

"Fuck."

"We should carry on and give him more memories. The puzzle may not need to be fully completed for Jungkook to wake up."

"Yeah." Taehyung nods. "Let's continue. I'll go after everyone else."

“Me next.”

“No. Me,” Namjoon intervenes and pushes Jimin aside. “Mine is that one time where Jungkook had run away in the forest. I was so worried but then I found him covered in mud and leaves, and all of that for what?” As he speaks, a third piece of the heart puzzle begins to lighten in pastel orange. “To grab a flower for Yoongi,” he snorts.

“I never got that flower.”

“Nope. Seohyung threw it away, and Jungkook and I got punished but it was so much fun. We were locked in the library and spent more time reading and making up stories than organizing the books.”

“Now *me.”* Jimin snatches the quill. “I won’t say what mine is, but it was about a date Jungkook and I had.”

Hoseok leans over the book. “Exotic shop, fireflies and—”

Jimin hides the book but drops it when it burns him. “Shut your mouth. It’s between Jungkook and I, asshole.” He peers at Taehyung. “Jungkook likes fireflies.”

Taehyung makes a non-committal sound. “Does he?”

“Yup. Take him on a date to a place where there are some.”

“Maybe to the weeping willow south of Vanae,” Taehyung muses, already thinking of when to take Jungkook there.

Ding… ding… ding…

Hoseok and Seokjin are next. The former’s memory is of Jungkook teaching Hoseok how to pick any locks. The latter’s memory is of an afternoon where Seokjin and Jungkook are at the shop, discussing fashion while designing some future clothes for Jungkook together.

Jungkook presses his trembling lips against his knees that he hugs to his chest.

He can feel Seokjin’s friendliness, how much he and Hoseok appreciate Jungkook and the time they’ve spent together in the memories. Jungkook can also sense how impressed Hoseok is by Jungkook’s skills, whether it be to lock picks or when Jungkook also gives him pointers on how to negotiate better deals with sellers in Eden.

Jungkook basks in the memories gifted to him, embraced by their warmth. He tries to stop crying, and he manages to for a moment amidst Jimin’s and Junhyun’s memories, however when Dahee’s memory begins to play before him, the tears warmly escape his eyes.

“My dear, why are you awake?” Dahee says and enters the living room of her house, Memory-Jungkook settled in the couch there.

“Ah it’s just one of those nights,” Jungkook says with a contrite smile. *“I can’t sleep.”*

Dahee doesn’t ask more. She rummages through the kitchen. Minutes later, she settles at the end of the couch and hands a warm cup to Jungkook. It smells like chocolate.

“Would you like to talk about it?”

Memory-Jungkook fiddles with his cup.

At the time, Jungkook had felt impossibly warm, but he had not realized that it had been due to the flames Dahee had been spreading behind the couch in a makeshift fireplace. Here, it’s also heightened by the sense of care that swirls from Dahee to Jungkook.

“Sometimes I get nightmares from my time with Seohyung, that's all. I wake up wondering if I’m back in the… Back in the bathroom.”

"In the bathroom?"

Memory-Jungkook hesitates, but then he says *"Seohyung used to lock me in my bedroom's bathroom. She'd cuff me to the sink's pipe and leave me there for hours whenever she'd think I misbehaved, or just to discipline me. Sometimes it kinda just happened without reason."*

Dahee's anger is quick and fierce, wrapped around a yearn to protect that Jungkook can experience. *“We would not let it happen again. Ever.”*

A smile. *“I know.”*

“ *This hellish woman may have not been a mother to you, however you are part of our family now, Jungkook, one that will do everything in its power to keep you safe and happy. It is what family does.”*

“Thank you,” Memory-Jungkook says, voice strained.

They remain in companionable silence for a while as they sip on their drinks, peering at the night sky through the bay windows.

A blanket is thrown over Memory-Jungkook’s shoulders after a bit.

“There is something I used to do with Jimin and Taehyung when they were young. I still do nowadays sometimes.”

“Uh?”

Dahee pats her lap. *“Rest your head here.”*

“I…” Jungkook stares at her, shyness taking over his form. He relents a moment later. He rests his cup on the table then lays on his side on the couch.

Jungkook recalls how at first he had barely rested the weight of his head on her legs, but had let go when she had gently pressed down.

Dahee properly covers Memory-Jungkook with the blanket. Then, and after making sure that Jungkook is alright, she tenderly cards her hand through his hair and begins to sing to him in a language that Jungkook now recognizes as draconian.

“Thank you,” Memory-Jungkook whispers, the back of his hand pressed against his mouth as a tear passes by the bridge of his nose and disappears in the blanket. He doesn’t stop crying no matter how much he wants to, unable to do so at every gentle pass of a hand in his hair.

“You are loved, Jungkook. By so many. By Taehyung, Jimin, Junhyun and I. By Seokjin and Hoseok who never fail to speak about you whenever they visit. You are loved and protected. Safe with us.”

And Jungkook feels it all.

The memory fades away to Dahee’s comforting fondness.

Jungkook waits.

He's missing a memory.

He fights off against the exhaustion that wraps around him. It’s getting more difficult, however. His lids are too heavy. He doesn’t want to wake up yet.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

“Your turn, Taehyung,” Jimin says. “Maybe Minsoo could give one as well?”

“I don’t have any to give," Minsoo grimaces. "Plus there’s only nine full pieces. And it’s missing the big one at the center, probably Taehyung’s. I guess the other one is the snake's memory.”

Taehyung dips the quill in the ink.

He had been taking his time to select which worthy memory to give away, preferring to go last. He has finally decided on one that he believes Jungkook would love to witness: it’s of lantern light and night sky, it’s of glass walls and a solarium that has become their space.

Taehyung thinks of the gift hanging there and smiles to himself. His hand inches closer to the book. A drop of ink falls in the middle of the puzzle.

A gasp freezes him on his spot.

“Jungkook!”

“By the Elders.”

Taehyung stares at the book as everyone rushes toward Jungkook.

The ink swirls. It disappears more and more, absorbed by the pages. It soon entirely vanishes along with the drawing of the boy and heart puzzle. When Taehyung touches one of the pages, it does not burn him.

“Hey, are you alright?” Yoongi worries.

Jungkook sniffles and croaks out a *‘Yeah’*.

Taehyung doesn’t look at him.

Ah.

Jungkook didn’t want a memory from Taehyung.

It reads like an abrupt, blaring rejection. It hurts more than it should, even if it was to be expected, in retrospect.

Taehyung should have known better, really. He had been right earlier when he had fought with Hoseok. His fear and vulnerability back then had been foreshadowing, weren’t they? Taehyung doesn’t know what Jungkook represents to him, why he is so different from everyone else, and it clearly doesn’t matter anymore if he never figures it out.

Taehyung isn’t so certain if letting Jungkook in had been so worth it if it hurts like this.

His nightmare feels foolish when he is the one to be weak.

Taehyung closes the book. He tosses the quill on the ground. He removes Revna’s necklace that he deposits on the book, then he stands.

A moment passes where the group discusses what has occurred to Jungkook, talking about challenges and whatnot. They mention having given a memory to Jungkook that they have now forgotten, and that it will live with Jungkook only.

“I could feel what everyone was feeling in the memories,” Jungkook whispers. “It was so lovely.”

Taehyung wants to reach out when Jungkook begins to cry, but Jimin is faster and the latter hugs Jungkook while Dahee pats his head..

“Did you feel my unbound love for you, then?” Jimin jests.

Jungkook laughs. “Yes, I did.”

Jungkook is happy and well. This is all that matters.

Strangely enough, Taehyung can feel some of Jungkook's happiness. Taehyung observes the way everyone hugs Jungkook, but he looks away moments later, shoving down the uncomfortable churn in his chest. He doesn’t want Jungkook to somehow feel it.

Ding.

Revna feels weird.

It's raining inside the ruby, but it never does. There's not even any wind here usually. But Revna can see red drops fall from the 'sky'. She remembers seeing the same rain outside of the ruby, and how everyone had fallen asleep afterwards.

Revna doesn't want to sleep. Revna wants to go, but she's too scared to leave the ruby.

Revna is scared of the forest. It looks familiar. Or rather *feels* familiar, but it's not in a good way like with Taetae. Here, Revna feels as though she shouldn't be in Kaiya.

Revna isn't welcomed here.

She can tell, but she doesn't know why. Revna is good though! She listens to Kookie — for the most part — and even to Taetae now. So why wouldn't she be welcomed? Plus Taetae always says that Revna is the cutest, so she should be welcomed everywhere if she's the cutest, no?

Revna hates this place, she thinks as she slithers around.

"Have you lost your mind?"

Revna pauses at the male voice.

"She could be incredibly useful," another voice starts. "She could solve what has been happening for *centuries.* "

"She, is a *child."*

"Oh please. You were the first one to request her sealing. This *child* would be rotting in a scroll if it was not for me."

"Because she is too dangerous to be allowed to roam around for free. Do you not remember what happened to Akantha?"

Someone sighs. "Akantha had been… unfortunate," a third voice interjects.

Revna doesn't like the voices, so she doesn't stick around to hear more. She wants to be away from them and she tries to, but all of a sudden, she slides down an edge and falls through a hole.

She expects pain to burst in her body when she lands on the ground, but it never comes. She shakes her head, blinking away the white dots speckling her visions. She rises on her feet. Her head darts around.

She's inside a cavern. It's vast, and it feels endless like the inside of the ruby, but it's not red anymore. It's dark and humid, with only some rays of light coming from high up. It's noisy too, a constant rumble echoing through the void and disturbing the ground her naked feet rest on.

A silver mist floats in the air, concealing the floor in a nebulous carpet.

Revna grips onto the front of her tattered shirt. "Hello? Kookie? Taetae?"

No one answers her.

"Revna don't like it here. Kookie? Revna wants to go." Revna looks around. Maybe Kookie is here somewhere since she's not in the ruby anymore? "Kookie? Kookie, Revna is… Revna is scared. Kookie." Her eyes sting, her lips trembling. "Taetae? Can Taetae come here? Hello?"

Revna continues to call out for Kookie and Taetae but they don't hear her from where she stands immobile.

Sounds of rocks grinding together above her head command her attention.

When she looks up, she realizes that the hole she had fallen through is more of an elongated fissure in the ceiling. The slit in the roof is surrounded by a larger, circle opening that is carved to the sky. The shape of the fissures in the ceiling remind Revna of Taetae's dragon eyes.

"Revna promises to not eat nixes anymore. Can Kookie come pick up Revna?"

Kookie never comes.

"Kookie, please." Revna's small fists lift to her face but it does nothing to stop the tears that roll down her cheeks. "R—Revna promises to, to be g—good. Can Revna go home? Revna wants to go home."

There's still no answer, and Revna lowers into a crouch to curl in on herself. She's cold. She hates feeling cold and being alone. Revna doesn't want to be alone again or with the mean people.

The voices from earlier talk again.

Revna hears some rain again, but it's distant.

"Kookie, don't leave Revna alone. Revna is sorry. Revna is sorry, R—Revna's… S'ry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, m'sorry."

Revna feels as though she has done something wrong but she doesn't even know what.

The sobs catch in her throat, wracking through her body and hurting her throat. She wants to be with Kookie and drink Taetae's honey tea.

"We should put her back to sleep," someone says.

"I suppose, as long as she is not sealed."

Revna flinches.

"Why not the seal? It would be safer."

"And harder to remove. Impossible, actually. It is considered a hex for a reason. Let us avoid such drastic measures while she is useful to us."

"We must put her to sleep for now. Fast."

"Let us."

Revna is really, *really* sleepy. She's scared. She doesn't want to be alone or sleep in this cave. She hates this cave. Revna wants to stay awake. Revna don't want to sleep.

She does anyway.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

“It is good to see you awake and well. We were worried.” Dahee hugs Jungkook and pats his head.

“Thank you. For the memory.”

Dahee smiles. “Of course, dear. You are welcome.”

“Is everyone alright?” Namjoon wonders and Jungkook breaks the hug.

“Yeah,” Yoongi says from where he’s standing near Jimin. The air seems different around them, more relaxed. “Are you?” He peers at Jungkook.

“I am. It was just a lot, and so strange to talk to myself like this,” Jungkook says, having already described the countenance of his nightmare.

“Taehyung is the one who got the idea about the memories. He thought it could work,” Hoseok says.

Jungkook’s smile falters when his gaze settles on Taehyung. The latter is away from the group, discussing with Minsoo. A dull pang twists in Jungkook’s chest that doesn’t quite feel like his own.

“We should leave this plaza and look for Elder Miseon,” Taehyung announces. “Or the guardian. Whichever we find first.”

“Maybe we could rest a bit?” Jimin proposes.

“And potentially go through another challenge?” Taehyung counters.

“Right. We should go, then.”

Jungkook approaches Taehyung with a hesitancy he hasn't felt in a long time. "Is everything alright?"

Taehyung smiles.

Dishonest.

"I'm glad you're okay and back. Are you alright?"

"I don't know," Jungkook confesses. "I'm happy, but I still feel like something is missing."

Taehyung hums and averts his gaze.

"I don't remember the memory you gave me."

"I didn't give you any."

"Uh?"

"The others offered you their own. I wanted to go last as I was still thinking about which one to give away. But in the end you woke up before I could." Taehyung dismissively shrugs.

Oh.

Taehyung didn't want to give a memory to Jungkook.

Jungkook opens his mouth to speak, but the words don't come out. Before he can think of what to say, a voice elevates in the plaza.

"Well done, everyone."

Jungkook peers at Miseon. He pretends to not notice the way Taehyung steps away.

"My apologies for the sudden disappearance. I had done so as per Kaiya's will," Miseon says with a bow.

"You never mentioned anything of such severity before we entered," Dahee snips.

"I, however, did mention challenges," Miseon retorts. "Kaiya's Night Terror had begun with Jungkook solely, however Taehyung's intervention when Jungkook had fallen in the river had thrown everyone in the Night Terrors."

"Why him only?" Taehyung asks.

"I'm not certain. All I can confirm is that Kaiya is nursing a particular interest for Jungkook," Miseon says. "He is the very first necromancer that can communicate with Kaiya's spirits."

Dahee clacks her tongue and curses under her breath. "It is a blessing that we have all triumphed, if so. What purpose do these 'Night Terrors' serve aside from being horribly unsought?"

"Kaiya uses them as a way to ascertain what gift to give during the departure, as the gifts are proper to each individual," Miseon reveals. "Kaiya does not know anything about you when you enter its forest for the very first time, however it does after the Night Terror."

Dahee scoffs and a flicker of amusement rises in Jungkook at how disgruntled Dahee looks. Minsoo seems entertained by it because he snickers, barking out a laugh when she swears at him in draconian.

“If that will be all, I believe each one of you has earned a well deserved rest and dinner to feast upon,” Miseon smiles. “We may continue our journey. We will reach an abode soon.”

“Fucking hell,” Hoseok grumbles. “Not even getting a break. The food better be scrumptious.”

Miseon laughs. “I promise it will be.”

Taehyung walks ahead without waiting for Jungkook.

Jungkook internally sighs. "Revna? Are you alright?"

"Kookie?"

"Yes, Lovely?"

"Kookie can hear Revna?"

"I always can. What's going on?"

Revna does not answer for a while.

"Lovely?"

"Revna is sorry."

"For what?"

Another beat of silence passes.

" Revna is sleepy. Can Revna sleep? Revna wants to sleep and not come out."

"Of course, Lovely. Is everything alright?" Jungkook hears a sad noise in his head. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"Revna don't want to talk about it right now. Is it okay?"

"Of course, we don't have to talk about it at all. But if you want to at some point, you can come to me or Taetae or someone else, alright?"

“Okay, Kookie. Thank you. Are Kookie and Taetae fighting?” Revna wonders from where she is in her ruby.

“We’re not. We just need to talk later.”

“Okayyy. Revna wants Taetae and Kookie to be happy, so don’t fight. Revna don’t like fights.”

Jungkook chuckles. “We won’t.” He tucks at the back of his mind Revna's sudden silence and aloofness to question it later on.

The group trails after Miseon as they resume their way through the forest.

Everyone still appears a bit shaken up from their Night Terror, a tired quietness draped over them. The mist is gone, the rain is too, and so is the bell as they walk out of the plaza and enter the forest again.

Jungkook remains at the back of the group with Jimin and Yoongi, away from Taehyung who's leading the walk with Miseon. Jungkook hears some voices here and there, but nothing as frantic as before.

The rustles are absent in the leaves, however they manifest themselves anew after half an hour.

"Feeling followed again," Hoseok says.

"Same," Taehyung agrees.

Jungkook looks at him for a moment, taking in the shape of his face that remains beautiful in spite of the blood covering it.

Taehyung's gaze darts on Jungkook.

Jungkook thinks about making a motion to ask for an arcane kiss, but he decides against it. Taehyung looks away anyway.

"Are you seeing anything?" Yumi asks.

"Some faces in the river," Jungkook nods toward the red stream they trudge along. "Nothing more."

"Miseon said that even the trees were once people that have become part of the forest. Have you tried touching one?"

Jungkook ponders on Yumi's remark. He hasn't yet. He walks up to a tree while the group continues to advance. Yumi remains next to him. They both halt in front of the trunk.

"Your necromancy seems more open," Yumi notes. "I can sense it in the air."

Jungkook hesitates before saying "It seems like it, yeah. I feel more… in tune with death, if that makes sense."

"It does, Jungkook."

"The other necromancers you've met…" Jungkook trails off to survey Yumi. "Are they equally welcoming of death? Do they find comfort in it like we do?"

Yumi hums. "A couple do, the others are more pragmatic. Death is a means to an end for them, and their necromancy is a tool for their business, nothing more. They don't view their arcane as an entity to care for."

"I see."

"My offer to meet some of them still stands."

"I know. It'll happen in due time."

Yumi's lips curl upward, and unlike Taehyung's smile from earlier, this one is honest. "Good! It'll be exciting."

Jungkook lifts an arm, his palm open toward the tree. He's about to touch the tree when wind taps his shoulder. He looks behind himself and he obeys the push on him and the pull on his hand leading him toward the other side of the path they've been walking on.

"Jungkook. Listen."

"Here."

"Watch."

Jungkook knows he's standing in front of the correct tree when the wind is gone, the voices mute.

"This one?" Yumi asks.

"Yes."

"They spoke to you," Yumi says with certainty, and Jungkook nods.

His palm touches the trunk.

An immediate pain bursts in his brain and jerks his head back.

Visions flash before his eyes one after another, too rapid to make out the details. Screams, cries of agony, hollered threats blares between his ears. Blood coats the ground. It splatters on walls, stands and furniture. It's trailed by vision of pure destruction as fire burns a town. A brown dragon is pinned down with spears pierced through their body, the wings torn away from them.

He feels himself stand up and look around.

A pit of death and carnage surrounds him.

Someone dies on his right, a spider-lily blossoming from their cleaved chest before withering away. Another succumbs to their wounds, a tree forming out of the wound where the head had been severed. More appear, peppering the area with carmine: red bushes, flowers, grass, a flurry of trees that become a forest. He sees walls of rocks surrounding him, stretching high up in the pit he's standing in. There are rivers carved through the walls, all falling into the lake at the middle of the cavity. The water becomes redder by the minute.

He turns around in the vision that isn't his own. He sees a human race toward him, the sword held high. It's about to swing at his throat. He's gonna d—

Jungkook wrenches his hand away and the vision disappears at once.

He staggers backward and he's about to fall when his back hits something.

"What's going on?"

A hand cups Jungkook's waist. He recognizes it and he promptly shuffles away in spite of the dizziness. "I'm fine."

“What the fuck happened? Did you do something to him?” Taehyung carries on.

“Why do you all accuse me first thing?” Yumi huffs.

Without warning, Jungkook does it again.

The pain happens. The vision is the same at first, however it changes. He’s standing at the edge of the pit this time. He can see walls of leaves around him. Jungkook can feel the amount of deaths that have occurred here.

Most importantly, he can hear them again: the voices.

They plead for help and healing. For freedom.

When Jungkook is pulled out of the vision, he breaks out of Taehyung’s grasp. “Why?!” Jungkook shouts both out of frustration and hurt because why is Taehyung acting like he cares when he hasn’t even given him a memory?

“What the fuck are you doing,” Taehyung snips, the muscles of his jaw tense. "You can't just touch anything here."

“Why do you care?”

Taehyung looks taken aback, the flash of hurt that crosses his face vanishing so fast that Jungkook thinks he has imagined it. “You’re being reckless. Why—”

“I was watching something!" Jungkook touches the tree again, however no vision occurs. "Kaiya has been trying to talk to me since I’ve arrived but now it’s gone."

“Kookie, you said you wouldn’t fight.”

Jungkook bites the retort dancing at the tip of his tongue. Instead, he turns around and joins Miseon, leaving Taehyung behind. “Is there some kind of pit in the forest? Where several river beds fall into?”

“Not that I know of,” Miseon answers. “Why?”

“I saw a pit. I think… I think they’re trying to show me something. A place. I'm not sure why."

Something darts in the trees’ crown. Miseon looks at the source of the sound right as Jungkook does. Another sound erupts. This time Jungkook sees a shadow dash between two branches.

Hoseok curses.

“Is the thing that was following us back?”

“Careful everyone.”

“Is anyone seeing any—"

“They must meet Donovan. I believe I know which place he may be speaking of, however reaching it is nigh impossible,” a voice speaks in Jungkook’s head rather than in the air. It’s feminine, with a rasp and something to it that betrays its age.

Miseon sighs. “I assume you mean the maze?”

“Yes. What else?” The voice snips with a certain temper.

“Who’s Donovan?”

“Someone important to Kaiya,” Miseon replies.

“The guardian,” Jungkook and Taehyung say in unison.

Miseon smiles.

“I have a better question,” Minsoo interjects. “ *Who* in hell has been talkin—”

Before he can finish his sentence, a small form races past Jungkook’s face, too rapid for him to see what it is. The *thing* — creature? — slides beneath Miseon’s cloak. It moves there, the fabric rippling, then it stills.

A staccato erupts from Taehyung, and Jungkook feels a whir in his chest that stops when the staccato quietens.

“Hurry,” the voice says. “It’s cold.”

“Yes, yes.” Miseon observes the wary group, a glint of amusement in her eyes. “We are near the abode.”

Miseon ignores the flurry of questions to resume her walk, and the remainder of the group begrudgingly follows her.

“You shouldn’t touch anything. The tree seems to have hurt you,” Taehyung suddenly says.

The remark annoys Jungkook. “I will do as I please. In the meantime, I will be at the head of the group to speak with Miseon. *Alone,* ” he stresses with an ire he doesn’t conceal.

“Jungk—”

Jungkook doesn’t stay to hear the rest of Taehyung's unwanted intervention. He catches up to Miseon, their steps falling together. “Elder Miseon,” he starts, “who is with you?”

“A friend.”

Jungkook observes the bump on Miseon’s shoulder under the cloak.

“He has a fire in him that would put to shame the fiercest dragon, huh?” The friend says.

“Something like that,” Jungkook says and hears a muffled snort. “Who are you?” He reiterates, having not expected the friend to directly speak to him.

“None of your business, Devourer of Death,” the creature replies.

“Devourer of Death?”

“You are a necromancer," the creature says, as if it makes any sense. "Kaiya is speaking of you. It has named you.”

"You can hear it too?"

"Of course."

"And were you the one behind the Night Terrors?" Jungkook continues.

“No. Kaiya was.”

Jungkook falls silent for a while.

A series of snorts and clicks elevates where the creature is.

“What is so amusing?” Miseon wonders.

“They remind me of Donovan and I,” the friend says.

“Who?”

“The Devourer of Death, and its Corrupted One.”

Jungkook frowns. “Who’s the Corrupted One?” The cloak ripples again. It lifts at the collar, and while it is darkened inside, Jungkook can still see two vibrant, teal eyes glow there, the pupils a thin slit at the center. Jungkook wonders if the friend is a dragonborn, but she seems so small, much more than any other dragon or hatchling he has ever met.

“Your husband.”

Jungkook makes an affronted noise. While he’s still upset at Taehyung for the distance he has put between them, he still says “Taehyung is not corrupted, or whatever you mean by that.”

“Many would beg to differ,” the creature says.

"Many are fools. And ignorant cowards."

"Corruption bears many forms. The chaos heritage of a dragonborn can corrupt them with madness, leave them with—"

"Taehyung may be chaos, but he is not mad."

"Not yet. Who's to say it will last? What if you were to die, Devourer of Death…" The creature's gaze turns into something calculating. "Do you believe the Corrupted One would not become mad from grief?"

Jungkook opens then closes his mouth. He briefly glances at Taehyung. "That was perhaps the case at some point. It may not be anymore."

The creature, to Jungkook's surprise, rolls her eyes. "Unbearable children."

Jungkook purses his lips, feeling a bit embarrassed for some reason. "I still don't appreciate you referring to my husband as a corrupted one."

“Would you prefer I call him *your* corrupted one?” The creature *teases*.

The embarrassment sharpens into a warm flush. “I—” He crosses his arms over his chest.

Is his fondness for Taehyung so flagrant that even a stranger would pick up on it?

“You didn’t tell me the Devourer of Death had such a mouth on him, huh. Damn kids. Disrespectful.” A click of what Jungkook assumes to be of teeth trails after. “Reminds me of a group that had tried to enter a while ago. One of them nearly died.” A snort. “Deserved, if you ask me. Donovan wasn’t so pleased though. Had to help those brats then cast them out. Donovan is too kind for this world."

“That he certainly is, unlike others,” Miseon quips. She yelps then smacks her hand on her shoulder. “Stop!”

“Next time I’ll have you be lost in the forest.”

“Kaiya loves me too much to let it happen.”

The friend never replies, and Miseon pompously smiles at Jungkook who laughs.

Jungkook listens to the new rant Miseon’s friend dissolves into.

Miseon’s smile turns lopsided. “I will be ahead to save you from her incessant rambling. Make sure the rest of the group follows us,” she says before walking farther to converse with her friend, away from prying ears.

“Kookie. Stop fighting with Taetae.”

“We aren’t, but even if we were, it is our issue to solve between him and I, understood?”

“Fine.” Revna huffs. ***“Kookie okay? Kookie was sleeping for really long.”***

“I am, Lovely. I’ll let you out whenever we have a moment alone. Maybe you'll feel better if you leave the ruby.”

“Okay. Revna can wait,” she says with an unwavering conviction that Jungkook smiles at.

Jungkook stills feels the remnant haziness of the vision, and so he gratefully smiles at Junhyun when the latter presents him his arm to hang onto. Jungkook leans his weight against Junhyun’s strong stature, turning his gaze away from the river.

As the trek continues, if some have noticed the tenseness between Jungkook and Taehyung, none speak a word about it.

They eventually enter a path where some kind of hut is built high up a tree.

A wooden staircase curls around the large trunk and up to the front door. The house is red akin to the rest of the forest, saved for the round windows where a golden light shines through. The roofs are slanted and covered in red moss and at their midst resides an elevated dome of stained glass.

“It reminds me of the Council’s greenhouse,” Dahee says, echoing Jungkook’s thought.

Miseon’s friend scoffs. “Do not speak of those self-righteous, idiotic buffoons.”

Jungkook muffles his laugh in his palm. “Dahee is part of the Council.”

“Well.” Dahee trails off. “I concur with Miseon’s friend, for the most part.”

The bump beneath Miseon’s cloak moves down her back and darts away to race up the stairs in the blink of an eye.

The house’s front door bangs open a lull later.

At Miseon’s instruction, the group climbs up the wooden steps. They soon stop in front of the door that has been left ajar. Miseon pushes it open and motions for them to come in.

Yoongi, Jimin and Hoseok are the first to walk inside. Junhyun and Jungkook are next.

Jungkook emits a mute *‘Oh’* as he surveys the room.

He doesn’t know if it’s constructed of wood taken from outside Kaiya, however the rustic interior is made of brown wooden slats and small trunks. What surprises Jungkook is how lively the place is, the array of knickknacks rivaling the one he has seen at Yumi’s house, however much more organized here. It also reminds him of Hyuna’s place, where a plethora of plants peppers the grand common room and kitchen at the back. The plants and flowers are of different colors while still retaining some red in them, whether it be in a petal where the veins have taken a carmine hue.

The dome of stained glass is even more beautiful from the inside. It reflects the sliver of light from the sky, illuminating in colorful lights the large pieces of marble mosaic that constitute the floor.

Jungkook is especially drawn to the library that makes up the opened second floor. It’s led by a spiraling staircase situated at the middle of the living room that climbs up then splits in two to line up the walls. “This is breathtaking.”

“Pure heaven,” Junhyun excitedly agrees.

Jungkook chuckles at the awed look that paints Junhyun’s face. “I wonder if there are ancient, rare books here.”

“Do you believe they would lend us one?” Junhyun whispers to Jungkook.

“It’s worth a shot,” Jungkook whispers back.

Junhyun nods, solemn.

“Donovan!” Miseon’s friend hollers. “They’re here!”

The door slams shut when Taehyung, the last one of the group, enters.

Rattles echo from a room at the back of the house where a huge door stands. Jungkook only realizes it now, however the place looks larger from the inside than the outside, with more space and high ceilings, and he wonders if some kind of dimension manipulation is at play. The atmosphere is different too, less dense.

Heavy footsteps thud on wood, so much so that the ground faintly trembles beneath Jungkook.

The door flies open.

A large hand grips onto the frame, and a figure steps out.

The first thing Jungkook notices is how *big* the hand is. The second thing that takes Jungkook aback are the muscles rippling beneath the skin of the man's displayed forearms. The person that enters the common area would put to shame Minsoo and Junhyun combined. The man is incredibly tall and large, probably over 2m30, enough for him to have to duck his head and walk sideways to pass the door's already high threshold.

The man steps out and straightens up, exposing his full size.

Jungkook tries to keep at bay his shock, but his brows still fly up his forehead when he has to crane his neck to peer at the man's face.

"Holy fuck," Hoseok blurts out then squeaks when Seokjin elbows him.

Dahee, unfazed, steps forward and extends a hand toward the man. "Kaiya's guardian, I presume? A pleasure to meet you."

The man rolls his wide shoulders, and the dark gray robe draped over the purple shirt and pants shifts when he does. He stares at Dahee's hand, his gaze unreadable. "Name," his voice rumbles, deep and gravelly. He must be around the same age as Minsoo, or perhaps older, the wrinkles on his face deepening around a glower.

"I am Lady Dahee, from the Kim family," she says and presents the rest of the group to the man that Jungkook assumes to be Donovan. "This is Yumi, a guest we are not affiliated to."

"Hi." Yumi calmly says, a contrast to the enthusiasm Jungkook would expect her to show here. She, however, has no shame in speaking out what most are thinking. "You're huge."

"You're puny," Donovan counters.

The exchange feels childish and Jungkook would snicker if he wasn't worried of offending the man that could very well twist Jungkook's head from his neck in a flick of his wrist.

"We are here to inquire about the passing of the second to last guardian," Dahee says. "I believe we may be of aid, one of us in particular, who can commute with the dead."

"What do you think?" Taehyung says as he shuffles near Jungkook.

Jungkook nearly ignores him, feeling petty, but he says "Sensing anything from him?"

"Aside from the fact that he's fucking humongous," Taehyung begins as Dahee explains more to the silent man, "he seems normal. He doesn't smell like a dragonborn at all, but some have close to no scent, so I don't know what to think."

"Revna agrees. Big Man doesn't smell familiar like Taetae or Taetae's family."

"If you have—"

"Do not touch," Donovan warns.

Yumi walks away from the lantern she was about to poke. "Apologies."

"If you have any information regarding the guardian's death," Dahee resumes, "please, do not hesitate to share it with us, as it may help us both."

Donovan's impassive stare drifts away from Dahee. He turns his head toward his shoulder. He nods a few times, then he lifts a hand over his mouth to most likely speak, even if Jungkook can't hear anything. He nods one last time.

Donovan's gaze drags across the group. His biceps bulge when he crosses his arms over his chest. His nose twitches and furls up. His eyes settle on Miseon and widen.

Donovan breaks into a large grin. "Miseon!" He booms and pushes past the group, sending Jimin to tumble on his rear. He hugs Miseon and lifts her off the ground, the woman looking exceedingly petite in the man's arms. "How have you been? You've taken a while to come visit us again."

Jungkook blinks rapidly, nonplussed at the sudden veer.

"I was quite busy figuring out the entrance to Kaiya for such a large group, as you know," Miseon answers.

"Right, right," Donovan laughs and gently rests her back to her feet. "Quite the interesting group you've brought with you." He peers at everyone one by one.

Or rather, *nearly* everyone, as Jungkook notices the way Donovan's gaze jumps over Jungkook and Taehyung both. From the way Taehyung's eyes narrow, the latter has also caught onto it.

Then Donovan shakes hands with the group one by one. However he does not seem to want to do so with Jungkook or Taehyung.

So Jungkook shoves Hoseok aside to stand in front of Donovan. He tilts his head back, and back some more until he can finally see the face. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jungkook," he presents himself. He scans the man's features that tense up, noticing some traces of scars here and there. More notably, Donovan's brown eyes remain evasive. Jungkook offers his hand and to his surprise, Donovan takes it.

Donovan's hand entirely engulfs Jungkook's and the start of his forearm. Jungkook can only imagine how easily a man of his size could break Jungkook's bones, yet in spite of this assurance, Jungkook can feel the tremors that run through Donovan's fingers, the grip loose.

"What's wrong with Big Man?"

Jungkook isn't certain.

Donovan promptly retracts his arm. He clears his throat and steps backward. "Greetings, Jungkook. Taehyung." He vaguely nods toward them and folds his hands behind his back.

"Donovan?" Miseon's friend worries.

"I'm all good." Donovan searches in the lapel of his robe where he plucks out a blue gray hand fan that he swings open and covers the bottom of his face with. A dragon is drawn at the front in black and gold ink.

"Want to bring out your flowers?" The friend asks from where it's probably hidden under Donovan's robe.

"They haven't fully grown yet. It has been taking a while this time, for some reasons," Donovan answers. "Are you the Devourer of Death?" He asks Jungkook without looking at him.

“I suppose.”

“A pleasure to meet you.”

Jungkook arches a brow. “Is it?”

Donovan emits a strained chuckle that is cut by a coughing fit that only eases when he creates more distance between himself and the group of visitors. “Yes.”

“Are you well?” Dahee wonders, her gaze darting between Donovan and Jungkook.

“Of course!” The corners of Donovan’s eyes crinkle. “I am simply… taking in.”

“I was not aware humans could remain alive inside Kaiya aside from the sparse visitors,” Jungkook tests, his attention born onto Donovan. “I’ve been told only the guardians were here.”

“What do you mean?” Jimin asks.

Jungkook doesn’t explain more. He waits for a reply.

Donovan’s eyes darken with amusement, peering at a point somewhere above Jungkook’s head. “You have spunk, young man.” The smile is audible in his voice. “Why do you say this?”

“Are you the guardian?” Jungkook tries.

His question is met with another one. “What do you mean by ‘guardian’?”

“Kaiya’s last guardian,” Jungkook clarifies with a temper, his impatience flaring up at the evasiveness. “What other kind of guard—”

“Jungkook,” Taehyung says and pinches Jungkook’s waist.

Jungkook quietens, but his glare remains on Donovan.

“Well,” Donovan starts. “Isn’t it a mystery waiting to be—” A pained exclamations cuts him off as he jolts on his spot. “Beloved, it hurts,” he says to his shoulder.

“Stop with this nonsense already,” Miseon’s friend snips.

Donovan, the tallest and largest man Jungkook has ever seen, and also one of the most intimating ones — at least at first —, subdues and *pouts.* “I thought we were to keep up the charade.”

“And it is obviously not working,” the feminine voice says. “Unhand me. Promptly.”

"Fine," Donovan huffs. He folds his hand fan and tucks it under his armpit. He searches beneath his robe at the shoulder where he takes out *something* that he holds between his palms. “Are you ready, Beloved?”

“Unhand me!”

Donovan lifts a hand, displaying what he’s holding in his palm.

A creature is poised in Donovan’s palm. It’s small. Tiny, even, the size of a kitten.

It’s the smallest dragon Jungkook has ever seen.

The dragonborn — if it is one? — is of a vibrant green whose skin takes a more gradient blue toward the tips of the wings. Spikes line the spine and chest with some pink webbing in-between, akin to those framing the face and jaws and fanning outward. They look more like colorful leaves than actual spikes.

The dragon is beautiful, the wrinkled face of a certain age, with bright, light blue eyes that bore into Jungkook when she elegantly lays down in Donovan’s palm, folding a talon over the other. She stares down from her vantage point.

“Meet my beloved Cahira,” Donovan presents. “Kaiya’s last guardian.”

“Wooow. She’s pretty.”

“I mean no offense,” Jimin begins with a raised hand, “but I’ve never seen a dragon like you before.”

“Of course you haven’t,” Cahira answers with snarky pride.

“Are you mates?” Junhyun wonders with a smile.

Donovan mirrors him. “Yes. We were mates long before Kaiya had become what it is now.”

“Are you a warlock?” Yumi asks next.

“No,” Donovan chuckles. “I’m a simple human, however I am gifted, so to speak, and kept alive by Kaiya.”

Jungkook’s eyes narrow. “Why?”

“I’m still not sure myself, however I have to thank my beloved for it. I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for her.”

Cahira bites Donovan’s thumb. “Because you deserved to be alive, unlike many at the time.”

“There, there.” Donovan pats the head of the frowning dragon. “I know, Beloved.”

“Follow me,” Cahira instructs, yet does not budge. Instead, Donovan is the one to turn around and walk toward a door at the far right of the living room that Jungkook doesn’t remember being there before.

Donovan opens the door.

It opens to a corridor of stained glass walls and ceiling.

“This place is beautiful,” Minsoo says.

Jungkook must not hide his surprise well enough because Dahee says “My father is fond of architecture. A stark contrast to how barren his lair is, isn’t it?”

Minsoo waves a dismissive hand. “Fond’s a big word. I can appreciate a well built house. And stained glass isn’t easy to sculpt.”

The group pauses at the end of the corridor where a new door stands.

Cahira's muzzle opens. Nothing comes out of it aside from a breeze that Jungkook can feel. Donovan hums a song to himself as he sways on his feet.

Cahira's reddish, wood-like horns move when she tilts her head, one of the two severed at the tip. There's some kind of diadem attached on the left horn, with a teal gem at the center that shines for a moment then becomes dull again. "Done."

"What kind of breath do you have, Cahira?" Jungkook asks.

"Unique ones," is all the answer he gets.

The door swings open to an empty room where even more doors can be found.

"You have showers and change of clothes behind each door. Use them before you soil my house any further," Cahira demands.

"Thank you very much," Dahee says with a diplomatic bow.

"I'm tired." Cahira yawns. "We'll speak tomorrow."

"There's a tomorrow?"

Cahira growls. "Didn't Miseon say there's a night and day cycle, you unruly child?"

Jimin subdues and ducks his head. "Right. Sorry."

"Wash up."

No one really moves as everyone stands in the room.

Their gazes drift on each other.

"Wash up! Now," Cahira booms, her tail flicking behind her.

"Right away, M'am." Hoseok scurries inside a bathroom but opens it again seconds later to snatch Minsoo by the arm and drag him inside. "I'm scared. Wash with me."

Minsoo heaves a deep sigh but lets himself be dragged in the bathroom. Jungkook hears exclamations and *'Wow!'* erupting from it, followed by grumbled agreements.

"We should shower in groups, indeed," Junhyun proposes.

"Then why did I bother making a bathroom for each one of you?" Cahira mutters and curls in on herself. "Ungrateful."

"Yoongi, do you mind going with me?" Jimin shyly asks, and Yoongi agrees with a smile.

"No funny business!" Cahira warns.

Jimin flushes. "Of course not! By the Elders." He runs away in a bathroom, followed by a snickering Yoongi.

Dahee and Junhyun leave together, while Namjoon and Seokjin do so as well. Yumi and Miseon wash on their own. Woobin looks tense in the corner of the room. Jungkook feels a little bad. He has half a mind to propose to shower with him, however Jimin opens his bathroom's door to grab and pull a grumbling yet evidently relieved Woobin inside.

Jungkook and Taehyung are left alone with Cahira and Donovan.

He waits until sounds of water echo in the room to speak.

"Would it be possible to visit the maze you mentioned?"

Donovan, who seems to act as a transport vessel for Cahira, pivots with Cahira in his palm.

"Why?" Cahira asks.

Jungkook opts to be honest with Kaiya's guardian. "I've been hearing whispers, they keep speaking about healing. They need help, and I believe I may be able to do so."

Cahira rests her chin on her talons. "Why do you wish to aid Kaiya's spirits?"

Jungkook makes a noncommittal sound of confusion. "Because I can and want to."

Cahira rumbles. She silently surveys Jungkook for a lull. "The maze is where Kaiya's rivers draw their blood from, which they then run through the forest and feed it with."

"Like a heart?"

"You could call it this, yes. A heart." Cahira hums and peers at Donovan. "I hadn't thought of it this way."

"It's fitting, isn't it?" Donovan remarks. "It also makes sense that it is so guarded. Neither of us has ever been able to reach the center of the maze."

"We'll see what to do tomorrow," Cahira says with finality. "Wash up."

"Actually." Taehyung steps forward and shows the pomegranate to the mated couple. "I have one last question regarding this. It was made from Jungkook and I's blood at Kaiya's entrance. In the field. I was wondering if it has any properties or—"

"Oh! How gorgeous," Donovan exclaims and grins.

"Would you like to check it?"

Donovan shuffles away and shakes his head. "Oh no. We cannot touch your gift. It would be highly disrespectful and invasive."

"Why?"

"Thousands of weddings and mating ceremonies used to take place in Kaiya. Love was one of Kaiya's greatest celebrations, even more for dragonborns who would be deeply attuned to Kaiya's potent arcane. The forest was also used as a place to hold mating chases," Donovan explains. "This gift you have received…" Sadness washes over his face. "Many would come here to receive their

own during their wedding ceremony. Others like simple partners or soon to be mates would also come here to get one."

"Were those gifts pomegranates?"

"It'd depend, but it was always something to be fully consumed," Cahira replies. "It usually wouldn't be bloody, though."

"Did you have one too?" Jungkook inquires.

Cahira dissolves into disgruntled noises. "Unfortunately."

"We had a potato, born from a piece of her horn and strand of my hair," Donovan says with a wide smile. "It was wonderful."

Jungkook bites back a smile when he sees how some of the pink in the spikes travels to Cahira's face.

"Nevertheless, it is a gift, one you can eat," Cahira resumes.

"What will happen if we do?"

"No long lasting effects. Nothing dire either. It is symbolic more than anything else."

"However you will experience a unique, intimate exposure that commonly lasts between 2 to 4 hours. Afterwards, the effect will be entirely gone," Donovan adds. "It will open the bond between you. It'll allow you to feel each other: your sentiments, your bodies, and everything in-between."

"Oh..." Jungkook glances at Taehyung who glances back at him. "It… Uhm. It kinda felt like that when we made the fruit. A bit."

"Still does on my side, even if minimal," Taehyung says. "As if I became highly empathetic towards him."

Jungkook nods. "Me too."

"This is the door the gift pulls ajar. Once the pomegranate has been consumed by you both in equal parts, the door fully opens. Refuse to eat, and the door will close."

"What happens once we leave Kaiya?"

"Nothing, as I already explained." Cahira huffs through her nose, green flames sparking out of the nostrils. "The door will close no matter what after leaving Kaiya. At least it has in most cases, although some mates could still feel a sliver of their gift's effect, but nothing invasive. Just surface empathy."

"Did it have any impact on the arcane?"

Cahira hums, her and Donovan peering at each other. "Not that I know of, no. While the gift *is* arcanic, its effect simply exacerbates one's empathy for their mate. However the creation of your gift was quite… singular. As it involved both your blood and arcane, which is something I've never really seen before."

“But is it safe to eat?”

“For the last time, *yes,* if you desire to.”

“It was quite the experience.” Donovan emits a happy sigh. “Very intimate. If you wish to consume it, I would suggest doing so in a secluded place. While the gift does not create anything new, it exacerbates existing bonds and feelings, as Cahira said. They may become overwhelming, and in some cases, virulent toward outsiders. It is once again particularly true for dragonborns.”

Taehyung nods. “Alright. We’ll keep it in mind.”

“Great. If that’ll be all: wash. *Up.* ” Cahira snips. “You’re dripping blood everywhere.”

“I’ll clean it, Beloved.”

Cahira levels Donovan with a glower that is somehow fond. “No. I will. You’ve done a lot already today, and the flowers are always taxing for you.”

Donovan pecks Cahira’s crown. “Perhaps I could finish preparing dinner, if so?”

“Donovan.” Cahira speaks in draconian, and while Jungkook can’t understand a single word, he still catches onto the reprimand that Donovan laughs at.

“Alright, Beloved. I’ll rest.”

“Good.”

Donovan and Cahira disappear through the glass corridor.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung. “Are you showering now?”

“No. I’ll go after someone else comes out.” Taehyung leans against a corner, facing the rest of the room. “Just in case.”

“Okay.”

Jungkook doesn’t say more as he enters a bathroom and closes the door. He reclines against it with a sigh.

“Why did you lie to them?”

Cahira looks up from where she’s wiping away the prints of blood the shoes have left behind. “Hm?”

“You told them there’s no downside. There *is* one. Damning at that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The edible gift. Many used to come retrieve their own here centuries ago, and quite a few have succumbed to its effects, to the beauty of the bond it opens between them,” Donovan says. “Why not mention a potential addiction that may drive them mad because they’ll never get the chance to taste such raw, arcanic intimacy again?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Cahira snorts. “Haven’t you felt their arcanes? The gift isn't supposed to have any effect on arcane, yet it does for them. The bond already exists between them; their body, arcane and souls know it, even if their minds don’t yet. Those that have succumbed to their gift’s felicity were feeble.”

Donovan’s arms curl around her chest as he leans forward to rest his chin on her shoulder. The position must be uncomfortable for his huge size, but Donovan never cared, and Cahira loves it too much to ever complain anyway. “Our bond wasn’t feeble, yet eating our gift nearly drove us both insane.”

Cahira’s grip tightens around the broom. “ *I* was weak, Beloved. You know it.”

“You were never weak. My warrior.”

“Stop it,” Cahira grumbles when Donovan nuzzles her neck but tilts her head to the side for him.

“Still.”

Cahira clicks her tongue. “They’d eat the damn fruit even if I had told them the risks. They *bled* each other to make it, Donovan. Madness is already part of who they are. What’s a little more?” She shrugs. “Plus I’m curious to see the aftermath.” She turns her head to meet Donovan’s gaze. “You have been avoiding them.”

Donovan hums and straightens up.

“The last time you had reacted like this with a visitor had been with that cursed daughter.” Cahira regrets mentioning this when Donovan pulls away with an irked frown.

“The cursed daughter was different. She… She should not be alive.”

“Do you believe the same for the two reapers?”

“I don’t know yet. I must properly assess their arcane first.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think eating the fruit is a good idea for them. It enhances too much. The fact that it also seemingly impacts their arcanes worries me.”

“The pomegranate is a gift, not a curse. It embellishes bonds, not madness or anything equally bleak.” Cahira cups Donovan’s cheek. “We can’t meddle with Kaiya’s gifts nevertheless, lest it takes our own back.”

Donovan relaxes and embraces her again. “Of course, Beloved.”

“They’ll be fine. You worry too much, as always.”

“And if they aren’t?”

“Then two more spider-lilies will bloom.”

Chapter End Notes

A HUGE thank you to Rach T___T She created Kaiya for SLB universe and I was soooo enchanted by the idea and the forest that I had immediately decided to implement it in SLB's main story and changed the storyline to make sure it fits hehe 🫶 so thank you very much for this Rach and for also being so involved to the creation of these chapters, I hope I did justice to what you had created with CH26 and CH27 🤱🤍 This is definitely not the last you see of Kaiya hehe, the boys will be visiting the forest again quite soon 👀🤍

I am SOOOOO excited for CH27 I hope y'all are ready for it this is genuinely my fav chap so far 😩 It'll be an emotoinal rollercoaster, full of taekook aaand special things that will happen and that I personally find aesthetic in my head T___T (I already doodled a scene from it 🥹). CH27 will def be the longest of the three chaps I had been working on as the draft is already 30K long, so the full chapter might reach 40K words 😵‍💫💫

I might post CH27 later than intended (so not the 26th/27th) as It's not fully written yet and there's an addtional scene that I wrote for it and may have gotten carried away with SO oui, but you still won't have to wait months so don't worry hehe 🤱🤍

Spoiler so feel free to ignore: Taekook will be fine the misunderstanding will be cleared quickly sksksksk

❧ Twitter

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH.

Jungkook's outfit
Taehyung's outfit
Yumi's outfit
(because I think it deserves its spot idc idc)

Kaiya's magazine made by Rach
Kaiya

The hut
Cahira
The hand fan

Chapter 27: Kaiya's Fruit

Chapter Summary

“That I do not know,” Dahee shrugs. “All they said is that a ‘fruit may be reaped’.”

“From me possibly marrying the human son?”

“It seems so.”

“Sounds like a damned, bitter fruit.”

Consuming the literal fruit of one's blood would be seen as vile by most. However for Jungkook and Taehyung, Greed and Lust have grown to be their favorite sins, and together, they unearth an eighth, new one.

Chapter Notes

Hellooooo, am back with a new eeeetra long chapter 🤍 This chapter is 99% Taekook being emo, gay and as always: unhinged together 🫶 It marks a VERY important evolution in their relationship (no kiss or confession yet though sorry b u t, we're getting closer to it eheheheh) It was also very self-indulgent hjbsjabhs I was just having so much fun writing it I hope you enjoy it as weeeell 🤍🤍🤍

Cw:

1) blood again
2) a sprinkle, smol tiny dash of blood kink (kinda) in a few paragraphs but nothing extreme at all

Song rec-ish as usual:

1) Start with Sand - Dove Cameron
2) Next is Gísli Gunnarsson - Birds of Paradise that I was listening on loop up until "Taehyung catches onto the tentativeness anyway, and he must handle..."

Then it's when it's not very specific because the mood of the following scene shifts every now and then 😭 So you can just pick which one you prefer and pause the playlist when there's a smol shift sksksk You can put these up until "Hands cradle Jungkook's face, straightening him up." (please do not mind or judge me for the titles of the playlists thank you.....)

3) Sexy playlist 1
4) Sexy playlist 2

5) Baby I'm yours - Isabela (I was looping it a lot)
6) Sexy playlist 3 I suggest skipping the first two songs!!

NOW

7) From "Energy is sapped out of him.": Melanie Martinez - Pacify her (s l o w e d + r e v e r b)
8) Then from "Taehyung does not show an ounce of hesitation when he dips..." up until the end of the series of scenes that follows suit (you'll understand): Still - Dove Cameron (can you tell or not she's become one of my fav musical artists ever)
And then for the last couple scenes you can put whatever you want!! They're too short for any proper song rec jhbsab

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jungkook bathes alone and promises to a sulking Revna a hot bubble bath once they're back to Vanae. It's not that he doesn't trust Miseon, but he still worries about a stranger's reaction to Revna. He'd rather not take any risks, plus Revna isn't too keen on leaving her ruby anyway.

As Jungkook passes the soap bar over his arm, his gaze falls on his wedding ring. He lifts his hand to his face and frowns.

The storm in the diamond isn't as present as it used to be. It's still there, lightning and minuscule clouds crackling and floating in the gem, but it seems… weakened.

Jungkook's lips press into a thin line.

Has Taehyung's arcane depleted more than anyone may have assumed? Jungkook doesn't remember if he has ever seen any kind of differences in the diamond before, even after what had happened at the manor.

Jungkook sighs to himself and files the question at the back of his head.

Once cleaned, Jungkook slides on the gray garments folded on the sink counter. It's warmer than it looks, and when he steps out of the bathroom and walks back to the living room, everyone is already out and washed, aside from Taehyung.

The group is settled at a newly added dining table, already munching on the feast laid before them.

Jungkook joins them, a bit wary. He halts next to a chair and waits.

"Dear?" Dahee starts. "Aren't you sitting?"

"Oh! Yes." Jungkook's cheeks flush as he pulls the chair himself and settles down. He notes how Dahee has seemingly not touched her plate. "Not eating?"

Dahee shakes her head. "Just in case," she answers and Jungkook smiles at how she resembles her son.

“Would you like some food, Jungkook?” Miseon proposes from where she’s sitting across Jungkook.

“No, thank you. I'm not hungry.”

Miseon chuckles. “You can trust Cahira and Donovan. They do not wish ill on us.”

“I’m truly not hungry.” The unconformable churn in Jungkook’s guts prevents any hunger from appearing.

Taehyung comes out of the corridor that vanishes behind him. He’s dressed in a simple black garment, hands tucked in his pants’ pockets. Jungkook feels a little silly when, in spite of the coldness between, he can’t help but stare at his husband, at the way Taehyung’s damp hair is slicked back over his head, a few haphazard strands dangling over his forehead.

Taehyung is so beautiful.

Jungkook wants to reach out but refuses to.

He looks away when Taehyung walks past him without as much as a glance. Taehyung trudges toward Donovan, the small dragon perched on the latter’s head. He discusses with the couple about something Jungkook doesn’t pry on.

Jungkook exhales through his nose. He props an elbow on the table, chin cushioned in his palm.

“Can Revna go with Pretty Dragon?”

Jungkook wordlessly gives the necklace to Jimin. He can tell Revna is agitated that he and Taehyung are arguing amidst the other matter that appears to upset her, but Jungkook doesn’t know what to do. He’s confused and still hurt that Taehyung didn’t want to give him a memory. Maybe it has been too much for Taehyung.

Maybe Jungkook’s greed is. He guesses there is a limit to how much fare Taehyung can provide before it becomes a burden.

“Can you come with me?”

Jungkook startles and turns. He peers up at Taehyung. “What?”

“Can you come with me,” Taehyung repeats.

“To go where?”

“Cahira and Donovan said that there’s a spot nearby where we can go that shouldn’t be occupied by any spirits. It’s close to the house but still far enough to give us privacy.”

“Ah. Okay.”

“Do you want to eat before or…?”

“No.”

They make their way to the entrance door after fetching some winter cloaks at Junhyun’s suggestion.

Taehyung opens the door for Jungkook, waiting for him to walk out first before leaving too. They climb down the stairs in silence. Once on grass, Taehyung leads them to the right of the house and through the forest. It’s dark out, only faintly illuminated by the moon in the now navy sky.

Jungkook pulls the hood over his damp hair. Taehyung does the same after a shiver. “You’re cold?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not using your fire breath?”

“Wait.” Taehyung pauses. Jungkook does too. Taehyung moves to be in front of Jungkook and the latter can feel the sudden warmth Taehyung emanates. One of Taehyung's hands slips under Jungkook’s hood. “Your hair is still wet.”

Jungkook stupidly nods, lost. He allows Taehyung to move even closer, and he doesn’t want to bask in Taehyung’s touch too much — he’s still upset and annoyed — but he can’t refrain himself from tilting his head toward the palm that cups his crown.

Jungkook yelps and closes his eyes when Taehyung breathes out a warm breath on his forehead and head. “What are you doing?!”

“Drying your hair. You’ll catch a cold.”

“So what?”

Taehyung doesn’t respond right away, busy with his task while Jungkook himself is occupied with staring at Taehyung’s collarbones that peek out from the shirt. “What do you mean, ‘so what’? Don’t fucking catch a cold,” Taehyung mutters after a few minutes and leans away.

Jungkook huffs. He doesn’t thank Taehyung, allowing himself to be ungrateful and a little petty. “Let’s continue.”

Their trek drives them through a small path that leads to a clearing. They walk up to one of the trees surrounding the deserted circle of grass.

Taehyung plops down. Jungkook settles next to him. “Are we alone?” Taehyung asks.

Jungkook can’t hear any whisper nor feel any presence. “I think so.”

“Alright.” Taehyung clears his throat. "Are you feeling okay? About the Night Terror?"

Jungkook shrugs. "It was a lot, and not very pleasant, but in the end it's… It's good. I feel empowered. And loved." *From most but not all,* he thinks but does not say as he surveys his husband.

"S'good then."

"What about you?"

Taehyung shrugs too. "Terrible nightmare with a good side. Kept seeing everyone die over and over again, but it made me realize a couple things. So it's fine."

Jungkook stills. "You did?"

Taehyung hums.

"That must have been horrifying."

Taehyung's mouth twists into a wry smile. "You died the most in them. I—" He shudders. "Anyway. I don't want to talk about it."

A new kind of rejection.

A silence floats between them.

Jungkook’s fists ball up on his legs that are folded beneath him. He then relaxes his fingers to fiddle with his wedding ring, observing the tempered storm in it.

“I’m sorry. For the cold shoulder,” Taehyung continues. “I was upset.”

“You still are.” Jungkook can distantly feel it.

“You are too.”

Jungkook hums, tucking the edges of the cloak closer to him.

“Is this about the memories?”

"What else would it be about?"

"I don't know. I'm not a mind reader and that's why I'm asking," Taehyung says with a certain temper.

“You can just tell me you didn’t want to give me one instead of being so aloof. I can understand."

“What?”

Jungkook’s glare snaps on Taehyung. “You clearly didn’t give me one."

"Yeah, and?"

" *And?"* Jungkook echoes with a strained laugh. "And it's upsetting that you didn't want to."

“I said the fucking opposite. I told you I wanted to write down a memory for you. I was about to.” Taehyung's lips press into a thin line. He averts his gaze. “I didn’t know which one to give you, so I wanted to go last to have time to think.”

“Any would have been better than nothing. Because even if you said you wanted to give me one, the fact that I never received any and how dismissive of it you were was just… It made me overthink.”

“You woke up. I told you.” Taehyung plucks at some strands of the grass, head held low. “You woke up before I could offer you my memory. Figured it didn’t matter and that *you* didn't want a

memory from me.”

Oh.

Right.

“I…” Jungkook breathes out loud. “God...” He rubs his palms on his face. "I'm sorry. I think I— I think I glazed over that and jumped into conclusion. I was feeling really open and vulnerable? And a bit insecure, I guess… I'm an idiot. But you're a bit of an idiot too. Not as much as me right now, but still. I'm sorry."

“Uh?”

“I was waiting for your memory in my Night Terror, but I fell asleep before I received it, and I suppose it’s when I woke up.” Jungkook lowers his hands. Taehyung’s confused gaze finds Jungkook’s. “Maybe Kaiya woke me up because it deemed that I had conquered my fear? So I didn’t get the chance to get your memory, and you didn’t get the time to give it to me. I also haven't received any from Revna.”

“So you wanted a memory from me?”

“Of course.” It’s upsetting that Taehyung would even think otherwise. “It’s the one I wanted the most when I realized what was happening.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

“Uh.”

“Indeed.”

“We *are* a little stupid, aren’t we?”

“You especially,” Jungkook teases. The aching churn fizzles out when a zap of lightning hits his temple, trailed by a curl of Taehyung’s lips. “You…”

“Hm?”

Jungkook peers at his fidgeting fingers. “Did you really want to give me a memory?”

“I did. I would have—” Taehyung pauses. “Anything.”

“Anything?”

“I would have given anything if it'd meant waking you up,” Taehyung says, too quiet and coy for his usual brashness. "It wouldn't matter if I'd lose one memory or several, because we'd get to form so many more in the future."

Would it be weird to thank Taehyung for this? It probably is, but Jungkook does anyway. “I would have done the same for you. Do you know?”

Taehyung observes Jungkook, his gaze searching. He must find his answers because he nods. “I do.”

Jungkook shuffles to sit in front of Taehyung, tucking his hands under his knees. “Do you want to give me a memory?”

Taehyung smiles, the curve gentle. “I’d love to.”

"I'd love to get one from you. I promise I didn't mean to wake up before receiving yours. I really, *really* wanted a memory from you, and to be able to feel how you feel with me. 'Cause it was reassuring with everyone else's memory."

Taehyung's hand is warm when it combs through Jungkook's hair, drying the leftover dampness at the roots. "I want to give you one but I don’t know how to make it work since we aren't in a Night Terror anymore," Taehyung says and Jungkook mourns the touch when Taehyung's fingers pull away. "I did bring your memory book with us. Had a feeling I should.” He takes out the tome from under his cloak along with a quill. “It was different during the Night Terrors, right?”

“It was. I could sense the surface feelings of the memory’s owner. When I spectate a memory, I’m usually just a bystander; even while watching my own.”

Taehyung stares at the pomegranate that lays between them. “What if we use this? It might have similar effects for us both if we eat it, considering what Cahira and Donovan told us. When we made it…” He glances up at Jungkook. There’s an unfamiliar hesitation that continues to drape over Taehyung’s form today. “You felt close to me, no?”

“I did.”

“Me too. So I’m wondering.”

“Do you want to eat it?”

Taehyung visibly ponders on his answer. His teeth grit together, the muscles of his jaw shifting.

“It’s alright if you don’t want to.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you’re hesitating.”

“Because it’s a lot. To let you in like this. And…” Taehyung does not meet Jungkook’s gaze when he whispers his next words. “I’m scared.”

Jungkook reaches out to grasp Taehyung’s hand. He soothes the trembles in them. “I understand. I’m scared too, you know.”

“Are you?”

Jungkook nods and smiles at the surprise that takes over Taehyung’s face. “If that wasn’t clear, I’m also not very familiar with allowing someone this close to me, in so many different ways. But I’ve been learning with you.”

“I enjoy your greed.”

“I’m happy you do.” Jungkook passes a thumb over the ruby of Taehyung’s wedding ring. “I can feel you do. I mean before the whole Kaiya thing. It’s why I’ve been letting it get louder lately.”

“Is it enjoying its fare from me?”

Jungkook shyly peers at Taehyung. He nods.

“Good.”

“You don’t have to be scared with me,” Jungkook mumbles, unsure on what to say to help Taehyung realize he’s safe with him.

“I never said my fear is rational or makes sense. It’s just there.”

“Even if you feel vulnerable with me, I’ll never purposefully want to hurt you.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you scared?”

“Because I don’t know what you are to me,” Taehyung rasps, his face knitted around a frown. “I don’t know why I feel this close to you when I never have been with anyone else in my life. Not my parents. Not Jimin. No one else. It’s only with you. I nearly died when you were gone, Jungkook, and I hadn't even fully realized.” He emits a mirthless chuckle. “You— None of this was supposed to happen. *You* were not. I wasn’t supposed to care for you. Certainly not this much and so confusingly.”

Jungkook swallows around the swelling lump in his throat before speaking. “Do you regret it?”

Taehyung doesn’t respond right away.

The silence is suffocating.

Jungkook feels like crying. Everything reads like a rejection to something he hasn’t gotten to know yet.

Taehyung rubs a hand over his face. “I don’t know.”

Jungkook reels back at the reply. “I see. You—”

“I should regret it because I don’t let people in anymore. Not since the man with the scent. Yet you’re here, and I’m happy with you, but it’s terrifying because what you are to me is so different from everyone else and I don't understand why.” Taehyung peers at Jungkook with unshed tears. “What are you to me?”

Jungkook shrugs but when he does something trickles down his cheeks. “It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“It does.”

“But you’re scared. I don’t want to be feared again. Not like this.”

Taehyung holds Jungkook’s wrist. “Jungkook—”

“I don’t know why it’s so vital for you to put a word on what I am to you. And you running away now is—” Jungkook pulls away from Taehyung’s grasp. “You can’t play with me like this.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“I’m not playing with you.”

“You can’t put me in your nest, raze an island to have me back, care so *deeply* for me, only to backtrack and say it was a mistake later on because you’re scared. I deserve better than that. And if it makes me selfish, then so be it. I’m selfish. But you can’t do all of that with me, be so— So—”

Loving.

“Be *so much,* and then snatch it away ‘cause you’re scared. It’s not fair." Jungkook emits a quiet whimper and lifts the collar of his cloak to muffle his noises. “It’s not fair, Taehyung. Storm, please.”

Taehyung curses.

Jungkook feels a searing guilt that isn’t his own. He doesn’t resist when Taehyung pulls him into a hug.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I—”

“You can’t give me so much, and take it all back so easily, like you don't care. M’scared too. Letting you in was scary.”

“I don’t want to take it back. I’m just— I’m a coward. I’m sorry.” Taehyung cradles the back of Jungkook’s head to pull him away. He cups Jungkook's face, brushing his thumbs on the wet cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you scared of me again,” Jungkook cries but it reads more like a plea.

“I’m not scared of you.”

Jungkook grips onto Taehyung’s wrists. “Don’t lie to me. Please.”

“I’m not scared of you. *I’m not.* Look at me, please.” Taehyung tilts Jungkook’s head back so their gazes find each other. “I’m not scared of you. I’m scared of what I don’t understand.”

“Why do you want to understand if you're not ready to hear the answer?”

Taehyung pauses at this. "Because I should."

"Why?"

“Because I need to.”

“*Why?”*

“I don’t want to lose you,” Taehyung rasps. “Because it’s not fair to you if I don’t understand what you are to me. Because I’m selfish too. You deserve so much, Jungkook, but what if one day I can’t give you what you want or need anymore? What if your greed doesn’t want me anymore? What if my chaos becomes too much to handle on top of everything else? I don’t want to lose you. To anything. And I don’t know why," he murmurs, his brows furrowed.

“I don’t care if you don’t know why yet.”

“It’s not fa—”

“You’ll know,” Jungkook assures. There is no doubt in his mind. “You will.”

“What if I don’t? What if it takes too long? I don’t even know what I’m waiting for, so why would *you* wai—”

“The painting in the solarium." Jungkook's thumbs brush over Taehyung’s inner wrists where the rapid pulse thuds. "The way you painted me, Taehyung… *I know* you’ll know. When you're ready. You will. I just need to be sure that you want to."

“Of course I do. Do you think I’d be feeling like this if I didn’t?" Taehyung says with a choked chuckle. "But I should know for you.”

Jungkook’s head tilts as he peers at Taehyung's trembling lips, a tear passing over them. "I used to hate holding hands, and it was… It was a bit of discomfort with you at first, but I handled it, and I’ve learned to love it. Allowing you to see my greed, to care for it. It was discomfort too, but in the end it was so, *so worth* it, and the discomfort vanished. I was scared when I began to realize you became a home to me. But I let you crawl in my chest, Tae. You'll know too.”

Taehyung presses their foreheads together. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I'm just really scared. I'm sorry. There's… There's so much going on, and then you were taken away from me," Taehyung says, and Jungkook basks in the carefree selfishness in the words. "I was in pain. I didn't think it was possible to be this terrified to lose someone."

"You won't lose me, Taehyung."

"I’m sorry I need time." Taehyung carries on, who doesn't seem to hear Jungkook. "I’ll make more efforts a—and I'll— I want to.”

“I know. You have already. I’ve seen them. I see you.”

“I see you too,” Taehyung murmurs, his blurry eyes darting between Jungkook’s.

“Everything little thing you give me and do for me, I see them all and love them so much. I just… I just need you to want to know, and to want to work for us and be honest. If you want t—”

“I missed you.”

Jungkook holds his breath. It feels too loud.

“When we were in the tent, and I said I was bored without you. I'd missed you. But I was scared to say it. I missed you when you were gone with Yumi. I miss you right now because I messed up again and you'd have every right to leave. I'd understand."

"I don't want to leave."

"You can if you want to."

"Would you be fine with it if I were to?"

Taehyung opens then closes his mouth. His palms never leave Jungkook's face, as though afraid that Jungkook might dissipate into thin air if he does. He shakes his head. "I'd miss you. I'd be sad. And lonely."

"Then don't push me away. Whenever there's discomfort, you can tell me and I'll give you space. I care about you."

"I care about you too. So much. I'm sorry for hurting you. I don't want to hurt you. I want to try with you," Taehyung says, urgency coating his voice. "I just don't know how. But I want to try."

Deep down, Jungkook had already known this, but hearing it shushes the lingering voice nagging at the back of his head. "You really want to try?"

"If you let me." Taehyung's lips press together, his fear palpable, then he says "Does it feel nice to hear this?"

Jungkook nods as he nuzzles Taehyung's palm, and he wonders if Taehyung can feel Jungkook's own fear. "It does."

"Okay. Okay," Taehyung repeats with a certain resolution. "You like hearing things like these?" Jungkook hums in agreement. "They're difficult for me to say."

"Discomfort?"

Taehyung nods. "'Cause it makes me feel like I open myself up too much, as if I'll be hurt if I—” He pauses. "If I care too much for you. I'll— I'll try more. For us. I want to. And if by then you want to leave, you can. Whenever you want."

"I'm staying."

"Yeah?"

Jungkook nods, finding it hard to find his voice.

"I'd like that." Taehyung cradles Jungkook's nape with a hand, his other one wiping Jungkook's cheek with his sleeve.

"When you scented me, when you bathed me, or washed my hair…" Jungkook hesitates. Maybe this is asking for too much now, however Jungkook wants to be heard as well. "You can't hide behind your dragon every time."

When Jungkook peers up at Taehyung, Taehyung's eyes drift aside and lower.

"Whenever you do something with me, or have a—an intimate moment with me and say that it's due to your dragon, that it wasn't you, it's cute and funny most of the time, but sometimes it's as though I'm not even worth your honesty. Like earlier, when you said you won't scent me anymore. It made me feel unwanted. Unworthy. Because at the end of the day, it's you. It's you who scented me. It's you who has done all of this with me. It's you who wants to, and it hurts when you keep blaming everything on your dragon as if it's a separate entity when it is not." Jungkook's eyes prickle anew, his voice muffled by a sob that catches in his throat. "I want you to be honest with me and yourself. It was just us when you scented me. You enjoyed it. I did too. What is there to deny if we both want it?"

Taehyung's head is ducked low, his shoulders drawn in on themselves. "I've really been a coward, haven't I?"

"Only a little bit." Jungkook's teasing is received with a wet chuckle from Taehyung.

Taehyung's warm hand tucks a strand of hair behind Jungkook's ear, the motion coy when the thumb passes by the earring. "I liked scenting you, even if it had gone way overboard. I was really drunk on your scent. I… uhm. This isn't an excuse. I'm not hiding behind this. I genuinely mean it when I say I felt high. Heady. It was new and weird, but really nice."

Jungkook chuckles at the remembrance of Taehyung's reaction to the scenting aftermath.

"I miss you when you're gone, and I like touching you. And being touched by you. It's… It feels good and—" Taehyung exhales, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. "You remind me that affection *can* be painless. That it doesn't have to hurt or be earned through pain. I like feeding your greed, it's lovely. But I don't— I don't understand why I feel all of this with you. I can't yet." His hands lower, just enough for his red eyes to meet Jungkook's. "Is that okay?"

"S'okay, I promise."

"You're worth it," Taehyung says, so quietly that Jungkook barely hears him. He clearly wants to say more, but it takes him a few attempts to finally speak up once more. "Because even if I'm scared of losing you, you—" Taehyung withdraws from Jungkook as his hands retract to ball up into fists on his lap. "Sorry. I'll mess up again. It's bound to happen."

"And I will too."

"But if you do it's fine. I can handle it. But I'm not easy to lo—" Taehyung's teeth click shut. "To care for."

"Nothing's easy all the time. I don't mind, and I know you don't mind that not everything is easy with me too."

"The months with the man with the scent really fucked me up, Jungkook."

"I know, Tae, why are you—"

Oh.

The understanding is abrupt for Jungkook.

Taehyung's fear makes even more sense all of a sudden, his cowardice does too.

"You deserve me."

Taehyung's eyes widen.

"You deserve me. Your chaos deserves me."

The way Taehyung looks right now reminds Jungkook of how he had been when he had stepped out of Yumi's door. Taehyung seems so tortured, and Jungkook can feel it, this distant ache that mingles with the guilt, as if Taehyung doesn't quite believe Jungkook's words, yet can't help but gorge on their presence anyway.

This time Jungkook is the one to embrace Taehyung in his arms and shush Taehyung's contained cries and the *'I'm sorry'* that are mumbled amidst two sharp breaths.

"I know. Thank you." Jungkook presses a kiss atop Taehyung's trembling shoulder.

"You too. You deserve me too."

Jungkook hopes that Taehyung can feel the relieved contentment that warms his chest. He still expects Taehyung to add that Jungkook deserves better, but Taehyung doesn't, and Jungkook rewards the wanted selfishness with another kiss on Taehyung crown.

"S'ry. I feel a lot right now. I don't know what's going on." Taehyung emits an aborted sob, and Jungkook is able to feel his disorientation. "Can feel you too."

"Do you like it?"

Taehyung makes a small nod. "I like it," he then voices out for Jungkook. "Made you happy to hear this. Caramel."

Jungkook chuckles. "It did."

The curve of Taehyung's nose and cheeks are wet when they nestle Jungkook's throat. "Okay."

Jungkook reluctantly breaks the hug to cup Taehyung's face and press another peck on the forehead. "We're crawling in each other's chest. It's a lot, isn't it?" Taehyung shakily nods. "I'm scared too, but you're safe with me. I'm safe with you t—”

"There's—” Taehyung presses the back of his hand against his mouth as he leans back and sharply inhales. "Fuck."

"Taehyung?"

"There's something. I'll have to tell you. After Kaiya." Taehyung's gaze swims with a blurry fear, evading Jungkook's seconds later. "Not Now. I've… Minsoo and I have been keeping a secret, and giving half truths about something."

"Is it something bad?"

Taehyung nods.

"I see."

"I'm sorry."

"Why not tell us sooner?"

"Because I thought neither of you would be able to handle it."

Jungkook tries to ignore the memories that flash in his mind, of Taehyung's depleted arcane, of Taehyung's cold skin, of the vial he has caught Taehyung take from Minsoo, and the ones that Minsoo himself has been downing. "You're an idiot. I'm not weak. We aren't."

"I know. Kinda realized that during the Night Terror," Taehyung says with evident shame.

"After Kaiya, you'll tell me then?"

"I will. I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

"I promise I'll tell you when we're home."

"Hm? Home?"

"I… I mean—" Taehyung's eyes rapidly shift between Jungkook's. "Back in Vanae? If. Uh. If you see it as a home?"

"Vanae?" Jungkook places a hand above Taehyung's heart. He softly smiles, his candor hidden beneath this layer of playfulness in his voice. Taehyung nods, confused. "But I'm already home right now, what are you talking about?"

Taehyung catches onto the tentativeness anyway, and he must handle the discomfort that has flared in him because he says "I'm home too."

It's ridiculous how those few words nearly make Jungkook cry again, and when a few tears do escape him, he buries his face in Taehyung's neck, sighing to himself when Taehyung's arms curl around him.

"I'm staying, Tae."

"I'm staying too," Taehyung says after a beat.

"Good."

"I'm sorry for making you cry. And not telling you the full truth about the thing. I'm sorry."

"Thank you for apologizing." Jungkook reclines to survey Taehyung. "I'm not saying I won't forgive you, but…"

"It's alright. I get it." Taehyung cards a hand through Jungkook's hair. "You need time too?" Jungkook nods. "How about we both give time to each other? Let each other see and understand."

"Yeah... It doesn't have to be complicated, even if it feels like it is sometimes." Taehyung's earlier confession floats in Jungkook's mind, and so he sprawls his palms on Taehyung's chest, pushing the

cloak aside to touch him better, up until their skins are pressed flush. “We can simply enjoy and feel together.”

“We can.” Taehyung nudges the apple of Jungkook’s cheek with his nose. “Are you alright?"

"I am. I feel good, actually. I think we needed to have that conversation eventually."

"I think so too. I just… I would have hoped for it to not happen so abruptly, so that it wouldn't have been as upsetting for you."

"You know," Jungkook starts and meets Taehyung's gaze, "I like it."

"Like what?"

"That I can allow myself to be upset with you without any fear. That if you upset me or hurt me, I can freely express it with you and cry, talk loudly or get angry at you. It's really nice, and… And I especially love it because I know we'll work through it and talk together. You give me so much safety, Taehyung. Thank you."

Taehyung's arms embrace Jungkook, pulling him closer. "I'm glad I can in spite of my chaos."

"Your chaos is part of why I feel safe."

"Crazy Viper," Taehyung says with so much fondness that it seeps within Jungkook's chest. "Are you sure you're fine?" Taehyung worries again and Jungkook smiles. "I mean with the Night Terror."

"Talking to my younger self was oddly healing. It was a lovely Night Terror, all things considered. And the fact that everyone willingly decided to give something so precious to me was reassuring. I feel very loved," Jungkook coyly smiles. "I was just sad to not have received any memory from you."

"But you will now, yeah?"

Jungkook emits a soft chuckle. "Are *you* alright? You kind of glazed over your Night Terror, but if you really don't want to talk about it, it's okay."

"It was just horrifying… I kept witnessing everyone's deaths and I… I even held your hand. And I only realized afterwards that you were dead. I held the hand of your *corpse*," Taehyung croaks out, a shine to his eyes. His trembling fingers tangle together, gripping tightly onto each other. "I can still feel how stiff a—and cold your fingers were. And you looked so dead and ashen and you just kept dying over and over again, and I'd die with you every time. 'Cause I couldn't handle the heartbreak. When I… When I was aloof with you earlier, I also just needed space. The Night Terror was a lot to digest, even if I knew it wasn't real in the end."

"You can just tell me when you need space. I'll understand and I won't be upset." Jungkook cradles Taehyung's face, and he's tender when he presses a kiss atop one of the damp eyelids, then a second on the other one. "I'm alive and well. I'm warm too, thanks to you. You can feel it." He brings one of Taehyung's hands to his throat, hoping that the feel of his pulse will help quell Taehyung's anguish. When it doesn't seem to be enough, Jungkook slips Taehyung's other hand beneath his shirt, up until the palm sprawls on the dip of his lower back. "See? I'm all good."

Taehyung sniffles and heaves a sigh. "Yeah… You are."

"I don't mind any touch from you. You can touch me anywhere you want," Jungkook says and only belatedly realizes how questionable the phrasing is when Taehyung quirks a brow. "I didn't m—"

"Anywhere I want?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"How depraved, Viper."

"I didn't mean it like that! Stop it," Jungkook exclaims and smacks Taehyung's shoulder. "All I meant is that I don't mind your touch."

Taehyung hums. "I don't mind yours either."

"Really?"

"Yeah, even on my back or shoulders, but you figured that out on your own."

Jungkook rewards the honesty with a caress on the scars marring Taehyung's shoulder blades, and he smiles to himself as the lingering tenseness in them relaxes. “Say," he starts but trails off for a while.

"What is it?"

Jungkook peers at Taehyung and his thumbs pass over one of the puffy eyelids, content when Taehyung lightly tilts his head toward his palm. “Does that mean you’d want to eat the pomegranate? Or are you not up for it for now?”

“Oh. I forgot.”

“We were talking about that, initially. But then feelings and emotions happened.” Jungkook groans with a roll of his eyes. He squeaks when Taehyung pinches his ribs. “Do you? If not, I really understand. Cahira and Donovan made it sound like it’ll be a lot to experience.”

“Can you climb down?” Taehyung’s hands lightly push on Jungkook’s waist.

Jungkook notices then that he has been straddling Taehyung. *Again.* “Right.” He scoots backward to settle on the grass, legs neatly folded beneath him. "Do you?"

"I want to. If you're ready for it."

"I am," Jungkook excitedly says.

Taehyung retrieves a dagger. He takes the pomegranate that he observes for a moment before placing it down.

“Do you eat this like an apple?” Jungkook inquires.

Taehyung levels Jungkook with a stony look. “No, Viper.”

“I don’t know how to eat a pomegranate,” Jungkook mumbles. “They were always already prepared for me.”

“Of course they were, my Prince,” Taehyung jests with a small bow.

Jungkook chuckles and swats Taehyung’s arm, happy that the distance Taehyung had put between them is gone. “Shut up.”

Taehyung stares at Jungkook through the few strands brushing his forehead. Taehyung's gaze is soft, in a way that Jungkook isn’t certain Taehyung notices, but it’s hidden when he looks down. “Would it be ridiculous of me to say that I missed you during the few hours we'd been sulking at each other?” It’s said with a chuckle but it’s strained.

Discomfort.

Jungkook feels it. He gnaws on his lower lip to conceal his growing smile.

Taehyung is really willing to try for them.

“Yes, it would be.”

The discomfort ebbs away.

“Damn it,” Taehyung curses.

“But I missed you too, so I’m equally ridiculous.” Jungkook pulls the cloak around his bare neck. He freezes on his spot. “Oh my god.”

Taehyung’s head darts up. “What? What is it?”

“I showered. I washed myself.”

“And?”

“And I washed my neck.”

Taehyung arches a brow. “a*And?”*

“And the makeup is probably gone!”

Taehyung tongues at his cheek, but it does nothing to hide the calculating curve to his lips.

Jungkook gasps. “You knew!” He points an accusatory finger at Taehyung who bursts into laughter. “You absolute prick! Why didn’t you say anything?! Everyone must have seen the marks!”

“‘Cause I was upset.” A brief lull passes. “And seeing the marks was helping with it.”

“You’re such a stupidly possessive griffin,” Jungkook mutters, impossibly endeared.

Taehyung says naught, but his shy smile speaks for itself.

Taehyung can be so cute sometimes, Jungkook thinks and bundles himself up to shove down the urge to coo at the timid dragonborn.

Jungkook sways on his spot when a vertigo suddenly sweeps him, however Taehyung straightens him up.

“You’re alright?”

“I’m a little dizzy?” Jungkook rubs one of his temples. “I think it’s just the aftermath of the Night Terror, and also the making of our gift.”

“Why don’t you lay down?”

Jungkook does so with Taehyung’s guidance. He moves to lay on his back on the grass, his head right in front of Taehyung’s crossed legs. He’d rest his head there if it wasn’t for the pomegranate placed between him and Taehyung.

Taehyung removes his cloak that he drapes over Jungkook, huddling him in a cocoon of warmth. “Is it better? Are you warm enough?”

Jungkook draws his legs up. “Mhm, thank you. Aren’t you cold?”

“I’m using my fire breath to keep us warm. You haven’t eaten anything, so it might also be why you feel dizzy. I’ll fetch you some food when we’re back inside the hut, yes?”

Jungkook further tilts his head back on the ground to peer up at Taehyung’s upside down face. “You’re pretty even from this angle that isn’t flattering for anyone.”

“I’m pretty from all angles,” Taehyung says as he lifts the pomegranate to show Jungkook what he’s doing. He carves a circle at the top that he removes and puts aside along with the cork. He makes a noise of surprise.

“What is it?”

Taehyung shows Jungkook what they can see of the pomegranate’s inside. “The skin should be white, not fully red like this.” He cuts along the ridges of the six segments, and once done, the pomegranate easily pulls apart between his fingers.

“Oooh… I didn’t know it looked like that inside. Are we supposed to eat everything?”

“Technically, no.” Taehyung places the pomegranate next to Jungkook’s head. “Usually only the seeds are eaten because the skin is bitter, but Cahira said it should be fully consumed, so I assume it includes the skin and flesh. Although the latter might taste bad.”

Jungkook pokes his finger in the pomegranate to collect some of the juice. He pops it in his mouth and suckles on it. “Oh.”

“Everything okay?”

“It tastes good.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.”

“Like what?”

“A bloody fruit,” Jungkook answers, perplexed at the metallic taste that retains a hint of sweetness.

Taehyung tosses one of the seeds in his mouth and chews on it. “It does taste good. Sugary blood. It’s weird. I can tell it retains our blood. Elders…"

Jungkook hides his face with Taehyung’s cloak and mumbles “I can’t believe we’re about to eat a fruit made from our blood.”

“It’s fucked up, but a fitting gift from Kaiya to us, if you ask me.”

Jungkook snickers and pulls down the cloak to his nose, breathing in Taehyung's scent. “It is.”

“Are you sure you want to eat it?”

“Are you?”

Taehyung surveys Jungkook for a moment.

Jungkook waits, and when Taehyung nods, he smiles against the fabric of the cloak. “Me too.”

Taehyung pulls up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows. He takes a crescent of pomegranate that he presents to Jungkook as he bows over him. “Want to start?”

“Mhm.” Jungkook wraps his fingers around Taehyung’s wrist.

Taehyung gently flicks aside Jungkook’s fingers to push the cloak away from his face. His hand holds the underside of Jungkook’s chin, the thumb pressing past the corner of the mouth. “Open up,” he softly instructs.

Jungkook's mouth parts open, waiting to be fed. It doesn’t take long for the crescent of pomegranate to be placed against his tongue, and Jungkook bites down. The skin and seeds crunch beneath his teeth. His lids flutter as he relishes in how savory the fruit is, but it isn’t enough, and so he takes another bite seconds later.

Taehyung's thumb rubs back and forth at the angle of Jungkook’s jaw. “How is it?”

“It tastes really good,” Jungkook says amidst another bite, soon finishing the crescent. A contentment seeps into him.

Taehyung’s.

It’s only when he collects the last trickle of nectar and swallows that a buzz begins to cloud his mind. Everything else sharpens on Taehyung. Jungkook craves more. Taehyung is too far away all of a sudden.

“You’re too far,” Taehyung mumbles above Jungkook.

“You’re feeling it too?”

The answer comes in the form of tamed tingles on Jungkook’s temple, right where Taehyung’s lips brush with a gust of soft lightning.

The air feels a little more dense, yet is contradictorily easier to breathe through. It's fuller, of words not needed to be spoken out loud, of their arcanes that begins to slip out without being prompted to.

Lightning coils around Jungkook's hands. He doesn't summon his flames, yet some flicker between his fingers out of their own will. They greet the tiny, electric bolts. Jungkook lifts his arms and places his fingertips on Taehyung's chest. He slowly exhales, watching the way the raven mist disappears within Taehyung. "You must be cold. My arcane is always cold."

"It is, but it oddly warms me up."

"It does?"

"Mhm."

"Good."

"Is my arcane cold?"

Jungkook shakes his head. He doesn't have heightened senses, but he feels as though he does when all that he can smell is this distinct scent of smoke and storm. "It's tingly and airy. Warm. Powerful. A bit of everything that is you."

A cadence resounds in Jungkook's head.

Badum. Badum, badum, badum. Badum. Badum, badum.

The heart beats, slow and steady.

Jungkook believes it is his own at first, for it is the only explanation that makes sense, however the palpitations do not match the one in his veins.

He listens.

Badum. Badum. *Badum.* Badum. *Badum.*

A flame envelops a web of lightning, and Taehyung's heartbeat syncs with Jungkook's.

"I feel good," Jungkook murmurs, surrounded by Taehyung in every way.

Taehyung's hand slips lower and cradles Jungkook's throat, securing. "Yeah?"

Jungkook lazily hums. "I don't feel like bleeding you though."

Taehyung chuckles. "Thank the Elders, uh?"

The itch in Jungkook's chest heightens. It coalesces with this sense of freedom that floats in him. Taehyung tends to lightheartedly jest about this, calling Jungkook a crazed viper, but Jungkook knows that there is a part of him that isn't quite *there.*

Taehyung knows it too, and he doesn't seem to care, a flash of amusement carried from him to Jungkook. Jungkook thinks back on his Night Terror, on his younger self that never had any safe space to speak, be and grow in. Up till now.

Jungkook smiles as he watches Taehyung munch on a crescent of pomegranate. The view should be disturbing when Taehyung cleans the juice from his fingers because it looks as though Taehyung is licking blood from a wound. However instead of repulsion, a cupidity is satiated.

Taehyung is consuming the fruit of *their* blood.

Jungkook wants it all from Taehyung and he'd worry about Taehyung seeing the starved beast break through the door if he wasn't busy setting it free.

"You can be greedy with me," Jungkook says.

Urges.

A veil of gold lightens the dark brown in Taehyung's eyes. "I'm not sure this is a good thing to say to me right now."

"It's the perfect moment."

"You're a brat." Taehyung shushes Jungkook's noise of complaint when his hand pulls away. "Gonna feed you another, hm?" He takes another crescent of the pomegranate that he lowers. He taps Jungkook's lips with his pinky, his other hand finding its home where it had been seconds before. "Open up."

Jungkook melts at the comforting pressure on his throat and jaw, and he wonders if he's a little too eager when his mouth immediately parts at the demand. He eats the pomegranate's crescent nonetheless, but he's lazy about it, not making much of an effort to be neat.

"Is it good?" Taehyung wonders and wipes his thumb on Jungkook's cheek where some of the nectar has dribbled.

When Jungkook nods, Taehyung's thumb slips at the corner of his mouth and past the lower lip. It catches on Jungkook's canine that nips at the skin even if he's not really certain how.

A metallic tang suffuses Jungkook's taste buds. He doesn't need to look to know that a drop of blood is stretching on his tongue.

He tries to fight the impulse at first, but his greed overtakes his mind, and he caves in.

Jungkook spreads the blood on his inner lip. He basks in its taste, how it blends so wonderfully with the one of Taehyung's arcane that saturates his mouth, and he drowns in the delirious sense of intimacy that swathes him at being granted Taehyung's blood, even if accidentally.

Complacency swells in him when, after flicking his tongue against the pulp of the thumb to collect the remnant of pomegranate syrup and blood, Taehyung's eyes fully adorn those of his dragon self, so bright and golden.

Jungkook wonders if Taehyung is pleased with the sight Jungkook makes for him: laid below him on the grass, adorning his gifts and marks as he gorges onto their fruit and each and every request Taehyung utters.

Taehyung answers the mute question by allowing his rapture to pass through the bond their gift has opened. The thumb teases past the teeth and canine once more, offering one more drop of blood. It slips away after one last stroke on Jungkook's lip.

Jungkook doesn't like it.

The juice of the pomegranate resembles blood more than anything else as carmine trails have trickled down Taehyung's wrist. It looks even more appetizing there, Jungkook muses and grabs a better hold of Taehyung's arm to bring it over his face.

Taehyung's fingers are lax when Jungkook's tongue drags over their underside, cleaning the syrup from them. Jungkook gives a particular attention to the palm, then to the inner wrist where he swears he can feel the pulse thud when his tongue presses flush there. The taste of the pomegranate mingles with the one of Taehyung's skin. It's sweet yet musky and it reminds Jungkook of the worn shirt he had buried his face into earlier this morning.

Jungkook is starved for more.

Taehyung must be as well because he eats two other pieces of pomegranate moments later, sharing one with Jungkook after being done with the cork.

Only one crescent is left now.

Taehyung stares down at Jungkook. "You're so pretty," he mumbles without seeming to realize, his gaze distant. "Ate well too."

"I did."

"Ate nicely for me," Taehyung carries on and Jungkook preens under the praises. Taehyung takes the sixth crescent that he splits in half, some of the wine-like seed and juice trickling on Jungkook's throat. "Gonna need you to finish this last piece with me, yeah?"

Jungkook doesn't respond, preferring to part his lips when Taehyung presents half of the crescent to him. The nectar flows in his mouth as he bites down, some of it slipping at the corner of his mouth again.

"Messy," Taehyung rasps after wiping away the syrup on Jungkook's cheek. He hasn't finished his last piece yet, putting it aside. His left palm drifts from the throat to hold the nape.

Jungkook tries to move.

Testing.

He mollifies when Taehyung's hold tightens in response, Jungkook now pinned down by the very weight of Taehyung's hands and gentle warning. Warmth swirls in Jungkook's belly, his respiration sounding far away in his ears. The heat grows when Taehyung bends over Jungkook to nestle the back of his ear.

Jungkook begins to clean the side of his throat where juice has been spilled. Or at least he believes he does, but his hands have not moved from where they're placed over his chest and gripping onto the cloak. He's confused through the blissful daze that fogs his thoughts, wondering what it is that is bathing his neck if it isn't his own fingers.

Jungkook belatedly understands when he feels a breath puffing on his skin as he stares at the sky and blurry leaves, Taehyung gone from his view.

Without any warning, Taehyung's tongue laps a stripe down Jungkook's throat and consumes what's left of the pomegranate on him.

The tongue finds its path to the front of Jungkook's throat. His breath hitches when teeth scrape over his skin as they pick the fruit's seed, the canines sharp and so close to the pulsating veins. The goosebumps that have flared there are soothed with a tongue that ghosts over the skin in an open-mouthed kiss.

Taehyung cleans one last dribble right below Jungkook's Adam apple that bobs at the tickling sensation, leaving a damp trail behind. His lips drift aside and press at the juncture of the neck. "Viper, can I…. Just a little. S'ry if it's weird, I—"

"Go ahead." Jungkook understands what Taehyung wants. "It's just me."

Jungkook hears a gust of wind. It's followed by a painless pull on the side of his throat and something slides from that point. It dangles at the curve of his neck but it doesn't get to drip before it's caught by the tip of Taehyung's tongue. Taehyung's lips faintly press where the minuscule cut where Jungkook knows a mark had been made a few days ago.

It stops all too soon.

Jungkook's whisper of protest is tempered by the way Taehyung nuzzles the apple of his cheek. His hands wrap around the back of Taehyung's neck and the nails anchor there to scratch up the scalp, needing to feel Taehyung better.

They're close.

So close that their respirations are exhaled in unison, less than a hair's breadth separating their faces. Their hearts continue to beat as one, and yet Jungkook needs to be even closer. He wants to touch Taehyung's shoulders and scars too but their position doesn't allow him to.

"Tae…"

Taehyung leans back, the tip of his nose bumping Jungkook's on his way.

Taehyung's lips are stained in red, his tongue too that swipes at the corner of his mouth to collect either some traces of Jungkook's blood or pomegranate nectar, and the thought that both *are* Jungkook either way is dizzying.

Jungkook wants to ask if his blood tastes nice, if his skin and the pomegranate do, but all that comes out of his mouth is a *'Good?'*

Taehyung understands nonetheless. He nods, his tongue darting out a second time. He wordlessly takes the crescent of pomegranate that disappears in his mouth.

As Taehyung swallows the last piece of Kaiya's gift, the door to their bond fully opens.

Jungkook is submerged by Taehyung's arcane that pours through him as his own drowns Taehyung. It flows within Jungkook's chest and limbs, in his mind and heart where it finds a home. It's lightning that crackles in the air, darting toward raven flames. It's a rumble that reverberates in the red sky where a cloud forms. It's wind that whistles and murmurs with contentment when it kisses a tattoo on the back of Jungkook's hand.

It snatches Jungkook's breath away.

It's so much.

Too much.

It's them.

Jungkook is completely clothed, yet he feels impossibly naked the more his arcane seeps out of him to coalesce with Taehyung's.

Jungkook's flames have a life of their own as they flow around like a ribbon of water. They approach Taehyung, touching the shoulder where lightning is drawn from, then they flicker to the chest where they brush past and gather an amber fire.

The flames and lightning hug and beckon each other out. They twirl and flick past, one caressing the other while the other dances amidst one. They feel like entities embracing one another, akin to two lonely chaos that have finally found their kindred soul.

A drop drifts down Jungkook's temple. It's met half way by the one that escapes his eye as he gazes up at Taehyung. "Taehyung…"

"I know." Taehyung is so overwhelmed, his throat clogged up.

Jungkook can feel it.

He can feel all of the confusion that is alleviated by an unadulterated peace.

Is this affection yours? Are these tears yours too? Jungkook does not need to speak them out loud.

"It's me," Taehyung whispers, and another drop falls when he blinks. "It's all me."

New drops trickle, but they come from the sky this time. It's different as one rolls down from Taehyung's temple to the cheek. A slow pitter-patter begins. A scent of grim petrichor rises in the air. Taehyung looks up and Jungkook does too.

There are clouds high up in the sky. They aren't gray or white. They're not even red as Jungkook would expect them to be in Kaiya.

Instead, they're a brew of black and amber, saved for the icy blue tendrils that crackle in their midst.

They're death and chaos creating together.

The rain grows, its onyx pearls warm as some land on Jungkook's face, more falling from Taehyung's hair and marking his skin in black rivulets. Taehyung wants Jungkook to taste them. Jungkook knows. Both of Taehyung's hands cradle the back of Jungkook's head that he tilts back the slightest bit, the request heard. Jungkook's mouth parts open.

The first onyx pearl that meets his tongue is *heavenly.*

It tastes like bleak flowers and metallic water, so rich and *good.* Jungkook's lids flutter and he watches how Taehyung's head lolls back to drink some of their rain too.

Taehyung exhales. “Our arcanes…”

Jungkook emits a pleased hum that Taehyung echoes as they taste one another.

A sound elevates in the quietude and a quiver oscillates in Jungkook’s chest in response. The rumble lasts for a few seconds, the sound happy and scratching at a tingling itch in Jungkook and Taehyung's chests.

There’s a selfishness that oozes from Taehyung, betraying its exigence in the way a band of wind coils around Jungkook’s neck before dissipating. So Jungkook tugs one of Taehyung’s palms to his throat. He lets the fingers of his other hand loosely intertwine with Taehyung's, and he hopes that the sound of their wedding rings faintly clicking together is enough of a reminder for Taehyung that Jungkook is not going anywhere, that he wouldn’t let anyone else touch him in such ways.

“Taehyung,” Jungkook starts and only continues when his gaze meets Taehyung’s. The pupil has thinned a little more, eaten away by the honey. “Is blood part of dragonborn traditions?”

“Not the way we've done it.” Taehyung’s thumb presses at the side of Jungkook’s neck before swiping to the front. It draws a necklace of lightning in its wake.

“Can you sometimes drink or clean blood? From a wound?”

“I don’t know? I don’t remember if I’ve seen dragonborns tend to each other’s wounds like this. But we *are* dragons. Half of us is beastly and primitive.”

“Maybe I should ask Jimin, Dahee or Junhyun,” Jungkook muses. He’s about to utter another question when lightning snaps in a distant thunder. “Taehyung?”

Taehyung averts his gaze and gnaws on his lower lip. He huffs a puff of air.

“What's wrong?”

Taehyung’s nose twitches. “It’s stupid. And discomfort.”

“Can you tell me?”

Taehyung props his arms on his crossed legs. He hunches over Jungkook, the hair of his bang nearly touching Jungkook’s nose. “I got annoyed,” he announces.

Jungkook’s chuckle turns into a full blown laugh at the pouted admission. “Yes, I know. I could feel it, Tae.”

“And you’re mocking me now.”

“I’m not mocking you.”

Taehyung flicks the corner of Jungkook’s curved lips. “What’s that for, then?”

“You’re cute.”

“I could never be.”

“You are, though.”

“No.”

“As my husband, you’re supposed to reply that I’m cuter.”

“But you’re not.”

Jungkook swats Taehyung. “Stop being a prick.”

“Don’t speak someone else’s name.”

The rest of Jungkook’s retort disappears.

The onyx rain grows louder around them.

“You said it’s just us. So I— I want it to be just us and not be reminded of other people right now,” Taehyung mumbles. “I’m not saying you can’t say my parents’ or Jimin’s name ever again. Just… Not now. I don’t like it.”

The itch swirls in Jungkook’s chest. “And why is that?” He wonders, his greed ravenous. “Want me all to yourself?”

“Something like that."

The answer comes faster than Jungkook had expected. A heat swarms his face, and Taehyung must both feel and see it because his coyness shifts into a teasing confidence.

“You’re with me, aren’t you?” Taehyung emits a pleased hum when Jungkook nods. “You know whose name to speak.”

“Yes, Taehyung.”

Taehyung smiles, a little something that is playful yet still retains a certain contentment.

There's a distant ache in Jungkook's chest, a dull pain that makes it a little harder to breathe. It feels as though he has a breath pouch of his own where fire flickers to wrap them in a bubble of warmth, and, really, Jungkook would be so much warmer if he were in Taehyung’s chest.

He would be, right?

Jungkook throws the cloak of himself and pushes Taehyung away. He turns around to face Taehyung, his body light and fuzzy. With more strength than he believes himself to be capable of mustering at the moment, he thrusts Taehyung on his back.

The chest is so much more accessible now, Jungkook muses as he straddles Taehyung’s lap and he presses their chests flush before hugging Taehyung’s neck.

Jungkook exhales for Taehyung as Taehyung inhales for Jungkook.

This still doesn’t feel close enough.

Taehyung hears and echoes him.

Taehyung's fingers walk a path beneath Jungkook's shirt. Jungkook sighs at the pleasant skin on skin contact, melting above the strong body beneath his own. Teeth ache a little, although he doesn't know if they are his own or Taehyung's. However it eases off when Jungkook lets his teeth graze on Taehyung's neck.

"You wanted to bite me," Jungkook states.

The haphazard circles Taehyung traces on Jungkook's hips halt. "I never said that."

"My teeth were aching 'cause yours were. Wanted to bite me. You're such a… A dragon."

Taehyung's laughter shakes through Jungkook. "Well observed, detective."

Jungkook rubs his nose and smiling lips against Taehyung's throat in an effort to scent him. He's rewarded with a touch on his back. It crawls up his spine but it can't be Taehyung's hands that haven't left Jungkook's waist.

Jungkook's smile grows.

"Your wind is clingy."

Taehyung clicks his tongue. "I'm trying to dispel it but it doesn't care."

"It wants to touch me?"

Taehyung hums, his palms gliding to the upper thighs where the thumbs knead. "My arcane wants to."

"It can."

The response is immediate.

The warm wind grows electric as it spreads along Jungkook's spine. It's erratic, jumping from the shoulder to the ribs to the hips, only to climb up to the nape where it rests in a heavy weight. It doesn't remain still for long. It pokes at Jungkook's cheek seconds later, drawing a giggle out of him when his nose is next.

"Fucking hell."

"It's like an overly excited dog," Jungkook says through a laugh. He reclines and guffaws when he sees Taehyung's glower, the latter mitigated by the pink hue coloring the tip of the ears. "Your arcane is so, *so* fond of me. You wouldn't be able to deny it even if you tried."

Taehyung intelligibly grumbles.

"I'm so happy." Jungkook cups Taehyung's cheeks as his flames possessively coil around Taehyung's chest. "Are you happy?"

Taehyung's face softens. He nods.

Wind skims Jungkook's temple.

"I can feel your greed."

Jungkook’s hands withdraw from Taehyung as he sits up. He averts his gaze and rolls the wedding band around the knuckle. He eventually meets Taehyung’s gaze again, prompted to do so by the palm that wipes some of the rain's onyx drops from his neck.

“It’s painful,” Taehyung rasps, full of understanding. “It was lonely, mh?”

Jungkook holds Taehyung's wrist and murmurs “It was."

“Is it still?”

“Not anymore.” A foreign heat blooms on Jungkook’s cheek and jaw. “I'm rea—”

Taehyung rips his hand away from Jungkook. “Shit. Sorry. I'm sorry. I’ve been careful to not let my fire touch you right now because it’s not tempered unlike the arcane pecks, but—”

“Taehyung.”

Taehyung’s teeth click shut as he peers up at Jungkook. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s going on with my arcane. I can't control it.”

Jungkook grabs a hold of Taehyung’s wrist while he shuffles on his lap.

“Wait don—”

Jungkook presses the palm against his neck. Amber flames coil around Taehyung's fingers. He can feel the lack of control in their untamed potency, in the scathing heat that has burnt some of the leaves yet is only eliciting a gentle warmth that seeps into his skin.

Surprise washes over Taehyung’s face. “They should burn you.”

“They should, but I knew they wouldn’t.” The flames spread in reaction, singing a small patch of the collar of his shirt. However when they envelop his neck and card through his hair, brushing past his cheek on their way, they don’t eat away at his skin as they would with anything else. “See?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Maybe it’s due to our gift, maybe it’s because we’re at Kaiya, maybe it’s caused by something arcanic we can’t understand yet, or ever.” Jungkook trails off to play with the fire that dances in-between Taehyung’s fingers and now his own. He leans forward, bracing himself with a hand on Taehyung’s chest. “Or maybe your chaos’ fondness for mine makes it harmless to me.”

There's an hesitant acceptance in the *'Maybe'* Taehyung utters.

Jungkook shuffles a little lower down Taehyung’s navel to have a better access to the shirt that he tugs from where it had been partly tucked in the pants. He bunches it up, exposing the belly button then the toned abs. He’s only satisfied when the rest of the chest is displayed, his palms cupping the naked ribs and…

Perfect.

Jungkook’s eyes glaze over, the shape of Taehyung’s body and face blurring. He shudders under another caress of warm air that dries the trails the rain dampens on his skin.

The inside of Taehyung's chest feels so easily accessible, something whispers in his ear, his earring swaying from the breeze. Jungkook is fairly certain he could crawl inside.

He can.

It's right there, after all.

Exposed and opened for him.

He *can* crawl in Taehyung's chest. He will finally—

"Jungkook."

Jungkook blinks some of the fog away.

He sees the smile that floats on Taehyung's lips.

Jungkook's gaze darts on his own hand that is held up by Taehyung, prevented from lowering. So he catches the dagger that is gripped between his fingers, the storm in his wedding ring crackling with fierceness.

Jungkook doesn't remember looking for the dagger, let alone grabbing it.

"Careful."

Jungkook mumbles but it's too intelligible to himself. "Wasn't about to use it," he tries again. His grip slackens around the dagger's handle.

Taehyung chuckles. "You were."

Was he?

"Yes. I could tell."

"M'sorry. I'm not— I feel like everything isn't quite real right now," Jungkook slurs. "Feels like I could really crawl in your chest if I tried."

"You can."

"Uh?"

The dagger slides from Jungkook's grasp when Taehyung retrieves it.

Taehyung guides Jungkook's palm to place it on his chest. "Your necromancy."

Jungkook breathes out an *'Oh'*.

Flames flick from the corner of his mouth. They aren't as dark as they usually would be, even if it's faint to notice. He allows his arcane to pool below his palm in a globe of flames that takes shape. It starts with the form of a finger, then a second, soon creating a 'hand' with them.

The 'fingers' fan atop Taehyung's skin, and ever so slowly, they seep within Taehyung's chest, meeting no resistance.

It’s warm.

So, *so warm.*

Jungkook exhales through his mouth, feeling hazy. His eyes close, and he swears that he can hear the blood pulse, feel it rush through the veins. Taehyung’s arcane greets Jungkook’s flames, welcoming him within its core.

His ‘fingers’ bump against something.

The thing he grazes feels ephemeral and gaseous, yet tangible at the same time. A tingle in his own chest mirrors the spot where his ‘hand’ has passed through Taehyung’s skin and flesh. Jungkook traces the shape of the thing.

Of the organ.

His breath stutters right as Taehyung’s does.

Taehyung's fingers tighten around Jungkook's wrist. "Jungkook."

“I’m…” Jungkook’s lids flutter open.

Honor and veneration coalesce in him.

His own for Taehyung.

Taehyung’s for him.

Taehyung doesn’t speak for a moment, but he allows Jungkook to carry on. He’s overwhelmed too, apprehension swimming in his gaze and through their bond, and Jungkook can tell that Taehyung wants to run away but chooses to stay instead. Jungkook can only whisper Taehyung's name, words escaping him. Taehyung draws a smile in response, small and honest and so beautifully vulnerable.

“How can you trust me so much?”

"I don't know," Taehyung whispers.

Jungkook’s lips tremble and he presses them against the palm that cradles his face. “Can you sense me?”

Taehyung nods.

“How does it feel?”

“Safe. Right.”

The dichotomy of his necromancy touching Taehyung’s heart isn’t lost on Jungkook as his ‘fingers’ wrap around the organ, the flames embracing it in a protective veil.

“You’re crying.” The pulp of Taehyung's thumb dries a tear. Jungkook emits a soft hum. “You’re happy.”

“The most.” Jungkook’s flames press one last kiss on Taehyung’s heart before they carefully withdraw. “Thank you…" Jungkook says, and he watches how a storm globe gathers at the core of Taehyung’s palm.

It’s a sphere of lightning and wind, but also of fire that timidly flickers on the outer shell. Jungkook can also somehow sense the healing and force breath in the globe. A faint cut appears on Taehyung's index, and a drop of blood slips from it to float in the globe. The bead of blood becomes more of a ruby that reflects some of the lightning bolts.

Jungkook emits a dazed sound. He glances at the seal tattooed on Taehyung’s wrist.

It’s still present, however the edges of the black band are blurred and wavering, resembling ink being washed away by water.

“The seal.”

“Hm?”

“Look.”

Taehyung peers at his hand. “What?”

“There’s a ruby in the globe. You can see it’s trying to solidify itself.”

“That's— This isn't possible. I took a vow with Woosung’s daughter. I shouldn’t even be able to break it, let alone diminish it somehow.”

“But you’re not alone.” Jungkook’s gaze finds Taehyung’s. “Your arcane isn’t.”

“I…” Taahyung turns the arcane globe in his hands, and the ruby swirls in it. The cut in his finger begins to heal. “ *How?”*

“I don’t know,” Jungkook mumbles. “Discomfort?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “No. I’m curious and a little worried.”

“Worried?”

“Because if the seal breaks, the vow will too, and what happens then?”

“Bastille.”

“That.”

“Fuck. What should we do?”

Taehyung snorts. “You’ve been cursing a lot more lately.”

Jungkook smacks Taehyung’s arm. “Taehyung. Focus.”

“I *am* focusing. What happened to the regal prince that can’t even say the word ‘cock’, huh? What have you become?”

“See?” Jungkook crosses his arms over his chest. “This is why we can’t have good things with you. We were having a nice moment, and you have to mention *this* of all things.”

“Sorry,” Taehyung chuckles. “Focusing again. So.”

“Yes.”

“About me having a fun holiday in prison.”

“Oh my God.”

Taehyung barks out a laugh and he’s so beautiful, his cheeks roundening and hair fanned out on the scarlet grass.

“You *aren’t* going to Bastille. They’ll have to go through me, then Revna, then whatever army of dead I’ll raise to stop them, and most importantly, the seal is back to normal.” Jungkook and Taehyung peer at black band whose edges have sharpened again. “It’s still weird.”

“Yeah.”

“It only started happening after I touched your heart with my necromancy. Do you think it’s due to this or the pomegranate? Or something else?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it's partially related to your arcane,” Taehyung muses, playing with the storm globe.

"Why?"

"Because the seal doesn't feel as strong anymore. It's still there, and I can't use my hemomancy, but I can tell it's less potent. It's as though your flames nibbled on some of the seal's arcane? Permanently so."

"By the Elders." Jungkook hunches forward, his palms cupping Taehyung's naked hips. "What if my flames can remove the seal? But they don't burn or hurt, though, so I'm not sure how it could erode an arcane?"

"That you know of. We still haven't found out what the last ancient arcane was that the ring had detected a while ago."

Jungkook is a bit distracted by how warm Taehyung's skin is beneath the pad of his fingers, soft and supple save for the few scars peppering it. "I think the pomegranate is at play too. Our gift is different from others. I can feel your arcane, almost as if it's mine. I can even distantly sense your breath pouch? Kinda."

"I can feel your arcane too." Taehyung gazes up at Jungkook. "If the pomegranate is a door for our feelings but also our arcanes to pass through, it might have some kind of effect on our arcanes, and by extension on the seal." A pang of worry flashes from Taehyung. Jungkook does not ask what it is about. "How— How much do you feel regarding my arcane? Can you tell that it's depleted?"

"Not really, no."

"Can you sense anything else?"

Jungkook shakes his head. "Is this about the secret you've been keeping?"

"Something like that."

"Okay." Jungkook pecks Taehyung's forehead. He immediately senses the relief that it elicits in Taehyung. "It's okay."

"We'll have to be careful about what we're doing if it can tamper with the seal." Taehyung resumes. "We should visit Woosung as well and be upfront with him and his daughter. Could avoid some preventable grief."

"Ehh, look at you growing, willing to communicate to avoid unnecessary conflict. I'm proud of y —" Jungkook yelps when Taehyung flicks his forehead. "Prick."

"Come closer," Taehyung freely demands.

"I'm straddling you, Tae. How closer do you want me to be?" Jungkook wonders and he's so bold but he has been growing such a playful confidence with Taehyung lately, where he feels like he can charm the gruff dragon with a smile, a pout or by purposefully baring his throat.

Taehyung is a little easy, Jungkook fondly thinks.

It usually doesn't require much for Taehyung to cave into any request Jungkook — and Revna — may have, even the mute ones. Although sometimes he *does* deny Jungkook, but it's always trailed by a pleased look or a hummed *'Good'* that never fails to throw Jungkook into a fuzzy loop of bliss and tingles.

"Lean forward."

Jungkook obeys and braces himself on Taehyung's chest below him. He melts a bit atop of him when one of Taehyung's thumbs absentmindedly knead at the flesh of his inner thighs.

Taehyung brings the bubble of arcane near Jungkook's chest. "Can I try like you did?"

"Of course," Jungkook promptly agrees. "I'd love that."

Taehyung stares at his own hand. His hesitation is evident. "I'm worried it might hurt you. What if it kills you?"

Jungkook would chuckle at the blunt question if he couldn't feel how genuine Taehyung's concern is. "Tae. Foolish husband of mine." His palm skims to cup Taehyung's nape and the tenseness in Taehyung's body abates. "Your arcane could be razing Kaiya as a whole, and I'd be standing in the middle of the blaze, unharmed. *Protected.* You won't hurt me."

Taehyung's response is belated, but it's spoken in the way he pushes the globe of arcane against Jungkook's chest, right above the heart.

Jungkook's lids flutter shut.

He can feel each and every single one of Taehyung's breaths sink within him. The sensation is strange yet so pleasant, as though Taehyung's arcane finds the empty space between each of Jungkook's cells to saturate the void with its presence.

Jungkook's head lolls forward as he grabs Taehyung's wrist, making sure that the palm remains where it rests. Taehyung's blood that had temporarily solidified minutes ago smears on Jungkook's chest.

"Are you alright?"

Jungkook reluctantly opens his eyes, but it's made worth when golden eyes greet his own. "I can feel you."

"Yeah?"

Taehyung smiles.

His eyes smile.

His heart smiles at Jungkook.

His arcane does too.

Don't kiss him.

The thought is staggering and haunting.

Don't kiss him.

Don't kiss him, don't kiss him, don't kiss him, don't kiss him, don't kiss him.

Taehyung does not make it easy when he gazes at Jungkook as though Jungkook has hung up one of Kaiya's moons in the sky. Taehyung's arcane makes it even more difficult when it embraces Jungkook in a safety blanket of electrical force and warm wind, ever so tenderly grazing his heart where the storm globe lightly crackles in his chest.

Jungkook shouldn't kiss Taehyung, yet he wants to. He so madly wants to kiss him.

"Jungkook?"

"Your chaos is so nice," Jungkook says to drown the voice in his head.

"What if it's gone one day?"

"Uh?" Jungkook catches the way Taehyung's eyes cloud, and how it's echoed by the worsening ache in their chests.

"What if it is?"

"It would still be there. It's you."

"Are you sure?"

Jungkook swallows a whine when Taehyung withdraws his palm, what remnants of the arcane globe fizzling to nothingness.

"You said you love my chaos. You mean my arcane."

“It’s more than just your arcane, you know this."

Taehyung makes an aborted noise that isn't quite a sob, but it's a half choked laugh that dies at the back of his throat. "Is it?"

" *You* are chaos, Taehyung," Jungkook chuckles and he doesn't bother concealing the reverence from his voice. "But if it is to disappear, then I'll be it."

"You will?"

"Anything."

A golden flame flickers to Jungkook's mouth, as though answering his promise with a kiss.

Don't kiss him.

Taehyung's gaze softens as he slips his hands beneath the shirt seconds later to cradle the waist, and Jungkook sags above him.

It's as though Taehyung's fingers are endowed with a musical arcane that delineates every note Jungkook's body can make. They play melodies with it that only Taehyung knows the countenance of, making Jungkook his very own instrument, akin to when Taehyung rakes his nails along Jungkook's spine, eliciting a shiver out of Jungkook.

Taehyung lightly chuckles.

“Tae?”

“Hm?”

“I want to feel more of your arcane,” Jungkook mumbles in the dip of Taehyung’s neck. “Can we have more?”

“You want more?”

“Please.”

Jungkook feels the world tip around him.

He finds himself laid on his back moments later. Taehyung’s wind acts as some kind of cushion that softens Jungkook’s fall then dissipates once he’s secured on the ground.

Taehyung settles between Jungkook’s legs. He doesn’t give any warning when he yanks at the collar of Jungkook’s top to loosen it. It's only then that he seems to be satisfied, confirmed when he says “S’better. Wanted to see your tattoos.”

Taehyung looks so focused, his attention entirely given to Jungkook, and Jungkook preens beneath it and his husband.

Taehyung braces himself on the ground with a hand. He lifts Jungkook’s hand to his face and he’s slow when he pushes the sleeve, the pulp of his fingers skimming down from the wrist to the inner side of the elbow. The skin is sensitive, even more so when Taehyung begins to brush haphazard circles there, or when he traces the lines of the tattoos in a lazy back and forth.

Jungkook mourns the lack of touch when Taehyung's hand retracts and hovers in the air. "You can touch me more." Jungkook's latent demand isn't answered by Taehyung himself, but rather by his breaths.

Lightning courses across Taehyung's lax fingers held above Jungkook's hand.

Then, something strange happens.

The bolts meet Jungkook's skin, and in a way they never have before, his tattoos *coil away* from the lightning.

When his necromancy takes the shape of his tattoos, the sensation is usually more like a cold water being draped over him. Here, however, it feels as though his tattoos are a warm body of tendrils that hugs his skin. It feels *alive*. It's ignited by lightning, prompted to react to it and shy away from the feeling.

Jungkook gasps then exhales when his tattoos retract at another brush of lightning. "Oh… This is…"

A low chuckle erupts above him. He gazes up at Taehyung.

A thrilled shudder runs down Jungkook's spine.

Taehyung is looking at Jungkook in *that* way again: carnivorous and enticed.

Jungkook isn't certain he wants to put up as much of a playful fight as he always assumes he will. It shouldn't allure him as much as it does, the way Taehyung's draconic instincts stir, the way Jungkook is reminded of how easily Taehyung could very well take his life if Jungkook were to let him.

"Are you the one doing this?" Jungkook wonders.

"My breaths are moving on their own."

Jungkook hides part of his face in the crook of his elbow, feeling pleasantly caged by Taehyung. "It's almost as though your arcane wants mine."

"Almost, isn't it?" Taehyung says with a tilt of his head. His gaze is lidded with something Jungkook can't decipher. "I wonder how much more it'd need for 'almost' to become 'wholly'."

"You tease too much," Jungkook mumbles.

Taehyung's lips curl. "How did it feel?"

"Weird. Good. Felt good."

"How about now?" As Taehyung speaks, the lightning fizzles out to another breath.

The fire curls around Jungkook's arm, and like a moth to a flame, it beckons his necromancy.

The tattoos that had withdrawn into messy lines now stretch over Jungkook's arm into their more distinct patterns that all converge to where the flames graze him. Jungkook's skin heats up, but as before, it never burns.

A ribbon of lightning walks a path down his arm. The tendrils of his tattoos shift away from it again, however the tiny bolts chase after them. Jungkook squirms on his spot when the electric tingle crawls up his shoulder where his tattoos are finding refuge. He feels the urge to hide himself even more, but instead he gnaws on his lower lip when he senses Taehyung's amusement seeps within him.

Taehyung lets go of Jungkook's arm that limply settles on the ground. He bends a little more over Jungkook who only notices now how the rain has stopped, the clouds of their arcanes gone.

Taehyung's fingers hover above Jungkook's displayed hip. They don't budge. Even as Taehyung stares at Jungkook with palpable rapture, he does not move, and neither does his arcane.

Jungkook's throat clicks when he swallows. "What is it?"

Taehyung doesn't answer. His tongue darts at the corner of his mouth where a flash of lightning flickers. He huffs a small chuckle.

"What?"

"My breaths are feeling playful, it seems."

"Uh?"

Taehyung's gaze lowers on Jungkook's navel. Jungkook looks down too.

The tip of Taehyung's fingers bump the hem of the top once. A pleasant prickle follows suit as the shirt is pushed higher up his ribs. What surprises Jungkook is that the fingers aren't the one to ride up the cloth. They never touch him, actually.

It's a warm breeze that flicks away the shirt.

It grazes Jungkook's side in a plethora of caresses that elicit goosebumps after goosebumps. It cups Jungkook's waist in the ghost of a hand that traces the grooves of his muscles, and Jungkook's own flames coalesce with it.

Jungkook shuffles a little the higher his top is pushed.

Taehyung's arcane appears displeased by this.

The phantom hand of Taehyung's wind brushes up Jungkook's chest and the motion is so slow and *languid* that Jungkook can't repress the noise that escapes him. His head tilts back when the 'hand' reaches the front of his throat, then it drifts to his nape that it holds, the pressure tender. His mouth parts around a trembling sigh when a second 'hand' presses him down at his hip, then a third at the shoulder, and two more at the other side of his waist and ribs, all keeping him pinned on his spot.

Jungkook stills and relaxes, and he obediently subdues. His fist that had balled up next to his head opens, the fingers unclenching. His head tilts to the side, barren and offered to Taehyung.

The reward is immediate: an unadulterated gust of contentment, accompanied by a drawn out rumble.

"Good. So good… Thank you," Taehyung murmurs and lowers to nuzzle the angle of Jungkook's jaw. He exhales there, warm and tingly. "You're beautiful like this," he says amidst another rumble

of his breaths.

Taehyung's arcane withdraws from Jungkook for a moment, leaving him bare. Jungkook's flames flare out in response. They wrap around Taehyung and bring him closer, possessively passing through the hands then pulling out, as though seeking Taehyung's breaths through the flesh.

And they are, Jungkook realizes, because they, too, are tamed down when lightning flickers in the air once more.

Taehyung leans back and lifts a hand to Jungkook's left arm.

As before, he's never the one to touch Jungkook.

Jungkook's tattoos retract at every pass of playful lightning, then they swirl back at the flicker of a flame. The lightning drifts away at some point and when it does, the tattoos run after it. *Taunting.* Their arcanes tease each other, beckon one another when one darts away, as though nothing is ever quite enough. They're a tide of movement Jungkook has become a vessel for.

They're ravenous for each other, and Jungkook is so *elated.*

Taehyung's fingers still don't touch Jungkook as they float above Jungkook's collarbones.

Jungkook can't see what's happening anymore, but he can feel his tattoos whirl on his throat in response to the lightning playing with them. Jungkook wants more. His arcane does too. None is given to either, and he whines. "Taehyung."

"What is it?" Taehyung flicks a gust of heated wind at the back of Jungkook's ear, the jewelry swaying there.

"Stop teasing me. You—" Jungkook hisses then he trembles with a faint arch of his back when a nearly painful prickle bites at the side of his neck, and it hurts *so good* that he'd ask for more if he wasn't preoccupied with swallowing down any noise threatening to tumble out of his mouth.

"I'm not doing anything."

"Your arcane, s'teasing me. You are."

"Am I?" The curl of Taehyung's mouth is calculating, followed by a band of cold lightning that encircles Jungkook's neck for a second. The tattoos fly down but they're chased after by the tiny bolts, and Jungkook can feel the unbound mirth that saturates his necromancy. "Should I pull away?"

"No."

"No?"

Jungkook shakes his head.

"What do you want, if so?"

"More. I just— I just want more. Please." Jungkook hears wind whistles past his ear then comb a strand of his hair, and it's as though it carries Taehyung's amused sound, where Jungkook can hear it ring between his ears along with hushed words of praise kissed on his skin.

“Then why don’t you let my arcane play with yours, yeah? It wants to.”

The shiver that runs through Jungkook at the words is acute. His arcane quivers as well, and he can feel its hunger becoming warm, the heat spreading through his limbs and swirling in his guts.

He must *reek* of caramel. Of pomegranate too. Jungkook really, *really* hopes he does. He hopes that the only thing that suffuses Taehyung’s senses is Jungkook and his scent. He hopes that Taehyung's mind can't conjure the existence of anyone other than Jungkook.

As it should be, a voice sussurates.

“My arcane is yours,” Jungkook says, and if the way his tattoos pool where Taehyung’s hand hover above his exposed navel, then trail after the lightning that grazes along the curve of his waist, his necromancy agrees.

His gaze meets Taehyung’s, and he wants to hide once more but he doesn’t. Taehyung wouldn’t like it.

“Is it mine to have?”

“Yes...” Jungkook tips his head aside at a push of Taehyung’s wind. He wants to say more but he’s distracted by this sense of sovereignty that flows in him, regal yet so contradictorily primal.

It isn’t Jungkook’s.

It bleeds from Taehyung and his arcane. It’s mirrored by the way the domineering yet tender hand of wind travels from the nape to the throat that it cradles, as if trying to steal Jungkook’s breath away.

Jungkook would let it.

There’s also this constant back and forth between their arcanes. A push and pull, an in and out that neither Jungkook or Taehyung can control. It’s how raven flames allow lightning to bury within their midst and dance there in lazy motions. It’s how wind, ever so gentle yet commanding, seizes the meat of Jungkook’s thighs to spread them a little more and accommodate Taehyung who pulls Jungkook down on his lap.

When Jungkook peers up at Taehyung, his respiration is a little too loud and comes out in huffs of black flames. Taehyung’s own mouth is opened around fastening crackles of lightning and brown flames that licks at the corner of his mouth.

Taehyung braces himself on his palms next to Jungkook’s hips. Jungkook would be whining at the lack of contact if Taehyung’s arcane wasn’t being overwhelmingly tactile.

Lightning peppers kisses along Jungkook’s spine that curls inward when they focus on the lower back that it must know to be sensitive somehow. Their tingles are smoothed by strokes of wind, and Jungkook can’t help but be enraptured by how differently each breath treats him.

The lightning is playful and full of bliss as it runs after Jungkook’s coy tattoos.

The wind is calmer yet more dominant: it pins Jungkook down, it cradles his throat and requests his surrender with assertive pressures. It *demands*, and Jungkook’s every compliance is rewarded by caresses and soft squeezes.

The fire, on the other hand, is so breathtakingly warm and affectionate. It's the cocoon that envelops them, or a graze on Jungkook's cheek, akin to a kiss that Taehyung doesn't dare give himself.

Jungkook *adores* Taehyung's chaos.

His arcane does too.

Jungkook notices how his flames seem to have lightened while Taehyung's have darkened, but he does not speak a word about it yet.

"Fuck," Taehyung groans and shuffles to press his and Jungkook's chests close. His arms cage Jungkook's head, his hands fisting the grass and soil to anchor himself. "M'loosing my mind."

"Is that a bad thing?" Jungkook surveys the way one of his flames writhes when Taehyung's wind coils around it, the two aerial limbs tumbling down and scattering across the grass in a puff of smoke.

"Yes," Taehyung hisses. He appears to have given up on whatever restraint he had left because his lips find a home at the back of Jungkook's ear where his face disappears. "Your arcane sets mine alight."

'You do,' the words ring in the air.

Taehyung's mouth trails a path down Jungkook's throat. His lips barely brush upon Jungkook's skin, but it still elicits increasing soft sounds from Jungkook. His fingers grip at the back of Taehyung's shirt as his thighs tighten around Taehyung's hips. "And?"

" *And,* " Taehyung starts, his teeth grazing the curve of Jungkook's throat, "my arcane wants to consume yours." A muffled keen runs through Jungkook. "It's… It's so fucking demanding, I don't know what to do about it. Nothing is enough. It's putting your greed to shame."

Jungkook hums a chuckle, his teeth coming down on his bottom lip. "And what fare does it want?"

"Anything you're willing to give."

Jungkook wants to say that he's willing to offer himself as a whole to Taehyung, but the words never quite come out when Taehyung presses an aerial kiss on one of Jungkook's collarbones. "Your chaos feels so good," Jungkook slurs with a shudder.

"Does it?"

"Mhm. It's so full. It's everywhere and so good."

"I want—" Taehyung reclines, just enough to find Jungkook's gaze. He looks dazed and out of it. "I need you to tell me it's okay."

"It is, you can—" Jungkook's tongue flicks over his lower lip. "You can take anything you want from me. It's yours."

Taehyung curses. His arcanes pours more and more from him, echoing the way Jungkook's does as well, the two pulsating in slow waves from where Jungkook and Taehyung are both laid. "You shouldn't say that."

“Why?”

“Because it makes me believe I could devour you and your arcane. It feels so possible right now,” Taehyung whispers against Jungkook's collarbone. “And you’d let me, wouldn’t you?”

Jungkook nods, unable to speak as he tilts his head backward to give more space to Taehyung.

“Will you?”

“ *Please* ."

That is all the answer Taehyung needs.

Taehyung’s contentment is palpable, oozing from the door of their bond and drowning Jungkook, but also quivering within Taehyung and Jungkook’s chests in a steady rumble.

“We’ll have that chase soon. ‘cause I need it. I think you need it too,” Taehyung says and Jungkook nods again. “But in the meantime…”

With one demanding push of Taehyung’s wind, Jungkook’s head drifts to the right. He stills when he feels the tip of Taehyung's tongue accompanied by lightning flick at the bare side of his throat. It drags a slow path up to his jaw.

Jungkook emits a small, quiet sound. “You can do more.”

Taehyung's rumble grows louder while his tongue flattens atop Jungkook’s Adam apple.

Jungkook breathes out, his palm skimming up and down Taehyung’s sides before passing over the shoulders again to tangle in the soft strands.

“I’m gonna— Ah… This is— I think I can almost…” Taehyung cups Jungkook’s neck. His pants are warm and tingly at the juncture of Jungkook’s throat, and without warning, his mouth closes around the skin there.

Taehyung emits a pleased hum and Jungkook squirms on his spot because everything feels so good. *Too good.*

Wind and dark fire billow, rustling the leaves on the ground around them and burning them to dissipating ashes. The trees’ crowns shake, faint but quivering more and more.

Taehyung suckles at the spot. He swallows and the sensation is uncanny because it’s as though *something* is pulled from Jungkook’s skin.

Taehyung suddenly reclines as he pushes himself on a hand. He looks aghast from where he sways above Jungkook. His pupils that had once been thinned are now round and blown out, only leaving behind a thin ring of gold. His lips are still red and tinted from the pomegranate, but there’s a darker patch at the corner that is wiped away by an eager tongue.

“Tae, are you o—”

Taehyune dives into Jungkook’s neck, and this time he licks a stripe along the length of Jungkook’s throat where his hand curls. “Fuck. Hah…" He pants some more. " *Fuck.* Why—” His teeth come

down on the place where he suckles the skin and swallows. The wind is louder, echoing every sigh that slips past Taehyung and Jungkook's mouths.

Taehyung fully sits up, braced with the hand encasing Jungkook's throat that drifts down to the navel a moment later. His head tilts backward. His gaze is lidded and distant, lost in a dazed trance.

This isn't what surprises Jungkook, however.

It's the black strand linking Taehyung's mouth to Jungkook's throat, like a string of inky spit that breaks when Taehyung's tongue runs across his lower lip.

"Taehyung? What's—"

Taehyung's thumb presses on the bone of Jungkook's jaw, pushing the head further back. He doesn't look down when he brings two fingers to Jungkook's neck that he drags down to the collarbone. Jungkook can feel something being tugged and pulled away from him when Taehyung lifts his hand to his face.

Jungkook watches the way the two fingers are coated with a substance that is too thick to be ink. It resembles blood more than anything else in its consistency, however it's black and does not reflect any light.

Taehyung's mouth parts open. He places the pads of his fingers atop his tongue where he lazily smears the black substance, his rapid respiration panting in the air in puffs of darkened flames. The pulsations of Jungkook's heart resound between his ears.

Taehyung is drinking Jungkook's tattoos.

Taehyung is eating Jungkook's necromancy.

Taehyung is *consuming* it all from Jungkook.

Jungkook can feel his tattoos reform from where they have been pulled out. Taehyung sucks on his own fingers then drags them out to licks the remnant of liquefied arcane.

Jungkook emits a pleased sound. "Does it taste good?"

Taehyung startles. His head and gaze dart low. Then one of his hands flies to Jungkook's eyes that it covers.

"Taehyung." Jungkook repeats Taehyung's name a second time as he holds the wrist. "Tae. It's just me. It's fine."

"S'ry. I don't know what's going on."

"I don't know either, but you—" Jungkook pushes Taehyung's hand aside to peer up at him. "I like it. I do."

Taehyung is silent for a moment, but it's broken by his rumble that elevates in the air again, echoed by the incessant euphoria that flows from him and seeps within Jungkook. "Can I—"

"Yes. *Yes*. Please. I like it. Love it, I promise. I—" Jungkook can't repress the sound of bliss that is freed from his mouth by Taehyung's lips. Taehyung mouthes at the curve of Jungkook's

collarbones, and Jungkook grips onto Taehyung's hair in return, uncaring of how much he pulls on the strands.

“Your arcane tastes wonderful," Taehyung breathes out against the skin before drinking more of Jungkook’s arcane in an endless feast. "Fuck… This is—” His hands slide beneath Jungkook’s shirt and Jungkook hums when the nails scratch a path up his ribs then down again to cup his waist. “Never tasted anything like this... Viper… What if I end up devouring you whole, hmm?” The question is trailed by a lap of the tongue that collects more of the tattoos. “I want to taste more of you. Want to taste your flames.”

Jungkook obeys the mute demand that Taehyung does not need to profess. He offers a hand to Taehyung who takes it ever so gently, the hold full of veneration.

Jungkook calls forth his flames. He shivers when Taehyung laves once at the back of the hand, collecting the tattoos and flames that spread on his tongue. Jungkook can see the way Taehyung’s tongue flattens against the roof of his mouth before he swallows, and the view feels so *lewd* for some reasons, even more when Taehyung turns Jungkook’s hand to lick a broad stripe from the palm to the wrist

Taehyung supports himself with a hand on the ground when he sways. “More."

Jungkook’s necromancy responds before he can even think of doing so. The tattoos reappear, flames swirl between his fingers, both thrumming in anticipation at the thought of being consumed by the dragonborn once more.

Taehyung does not waste another second

He eats the flames and curses in-between two bobs of his Adam’s apple. He buries his face in Jungkook’s neck. His teeth rake there as they close around a string of the tattoos that he pulls on and swallows seconds later. “You taste fucking divine. Can even taste your scent,” he rasps and mouths at the point behind Jungkook’s ear, eliciting a tide of goosebumps and sighs. “You smell so good.”

Jungkook mollifies where he’s laid. “Want more?”

“Do you want to taste yourself?”

“I…” Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip. He nods. He tries to pull his tattoos from his skin, similar to how Taehyung has done it, but it does not work.

Taehyung shushes Jungkook’s noises of complaint. “I’ll feed you, yeah?” He reassures with a nudge of his nose on Jungkook’s cheek as he places a hand next to Jungkook’s head. Taehyung’s thumb strokes along Jungkook’s collarbones, then to the side of the neck where a vein steadily pulses. When Taehyung presents the finger seconds later, it’s coated in the black substance of the tattoos and accompanied by one of Jungkook’s flames. “Open up for me.”

Jungkook does. He even lets the tip of his tongue slightly loll out, just enough for Taehyung to press the pad of his thumb on it. Taehyung smears the liquid arcane then withdraws, and Jungkook swallows. “Oh. This— Tae, this is…” The taste is unexpectedly pleasant. It’s sweet yet incredibly rich, and it retains the grimness of his necromancy that works as an enhancer rather than a deterrent that would spoil the flavor.

Jungkook wants to hide himself and he tries to, but Taehyung promptly pins Jungkook's wrist down.

"Don't," Taehyung warns and Jungkook nods. "How was it?"

"It tasted good…"

Taehyung hums a chuckle. This time two of his fingers collect more tattoos at the front of the throat. He lays them on Jungkook's lower lip and he spreads them apart to smudge the substance. Jungkook's tongue lazily drags on the pulp of the fingers, both to taste himself again but also Taehyung's skin.

"S'good," Jungkook speaks against Taehyung's fingers. However he wants something different.

A whistle of wind.

A faint hiss from Taehyung trailed by a twitch of his index and middle fingers.

Then, a metallic tang.

Thank you, Jungkook does not need to say, and the wind answers with a caress of his face.

He grabs a hold of Taehyung's wrist and without an ounce of shame or overthinking, he guides the two fingers in his mouth, his lids falling shut.

He suckles on the fingers. He revels in the taste of his necromancy and Taehyung's blood, the two blending together so exquisitely. However he also enjoys the simple feeling of it: of the warm presence and weight of Taehyung's fingers, of the bumps of the knuckles that Jungkook gently gnaws on, only to soothe the bites with drags of his tongue.

Jungkook's lips part around a pant to ghost his tongue on the pulp on Taehyung's fingers and it numbs his mind to a yarn of muddled cotton. It's when Taehyung's arcane fills Jungkook's mouth with a stormy zing and smoky aroma that Jungkook loses all sense of self.

Only one name is left.

Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung, Taehyung.

Taehyung's arcane and skin tastes heavenly. The lightning and fire tastes so good too. *Taehyung does.* Jungkook craves so much more. He needs more. Now. But he doesn't know how to, unable to even tell where his and Taehyung's bodies end anymore.

The wind has picked up even more, carrying Jungkook's flames in its midst and shaking trees.

Jungkook pants around Taehyung's fingers before pulling them out his mouth, a trail of spit and lightning linking them to his lips. "Tae. Taehyung. Please. *Please,* Tae."

Taehyung reads through the plea Jungkook can't formulate. He makes a miniature storm globe that is more of a small marble, and he drops a bead of blood at the center. Held between his index and middle fingers, he feeds the candy of arcane to Jungkook.

Jungkook shivers when the two fingers slide along his teeth to place the pearl on his tongue.

Taehyung feeds himself as well at the same time. He's not bothered by the way Jungkook's spit coats his other index and middle fingers when he skims them on Jungkook's throat then brings them to his own mouth to swallow the raven tattoos and the remnants of saliva Jungkook has left behind. "I can't get enough of it."

Jungkook breathes out Taehyung's name over and over again, and every time Taehyung rewards Jungkook with rumbles of approval in his ear.

"So beautiful."

"Eating so well for me… Tastes good, yeah?"

"Want one more?"

"I'll give you more. Anything. Doing so good, giving me so much… Thank you."

Jungkook is full of Taehyung's arcane the more he eats the storm pearls. Taehyung is full of Jungkook's arcane the more he laps, suckles and drinks the tattoos.

A certain urgency begins to coat their movements, voices and arcanes.

Taehyung doesn't seem to notice the way his arcane pulsates out of him faster and faster, one breath throbbing outward after another.

The wind wave pushes more of the leaves and soil away, becoming louder the more time passes. The fire wave singes the red leaves into ashes that blend with Jungkook's flames that aren't so black anymore.

The lightning pulse is the one that is ever present amidst the other waves. It snaps left in any and every direction. It burns trails on the ground that spread outward more and more. It crackles and quivers, as though growing closer to implode on itself.

Then, at their core, there's Jungkook necromancy, whose flames fill the area and progressively blend with Taehyung's breaths.

One arcane becomes brighter.

A second becomes darker.

Soon, both become one, neither dark or light, but rather something new entirely.

Everything is so overwhelming that Jungkook has to breathe through his mouth to send a semblance of air to his brain. It's the same for Taehyung, the two of them panting in unison.

Another wave of their arcane pulses out of them and drives leaves outward. A second wave arrives, faster and stronger, delineating burnt ridges on trees and soil. At the third, Jungkook's spine arches when it wrenches air from his lungs, the bliss unlike anything he has ever felt before. The fourth rips a hummed rumble from Taehyung and a pleased groan that he muffles above Jungkook's throat with a trail of his tongue.

The more Jungkook and Taehyung consume from each other, the more their arcanes coalesce as one entity.

Like lovers embracing each other, a treacherous voice murmurs at the back of Jungkook's mind. He whines at the thought. He craves this so desperately, the taste of it he's granted today so heavenly and perfect and wonderfully painful.

A fifth wave takes the shape of an increasing, scarlet storm around their bodies.

A sixth wave begins, uprooting the trees closest to them.

Jungkook grips onto Taehyung's shirt and pulls, bringing him closer if possible. Taehyung sits up and as he does, he curls an arm around Jungkook to bring him up with him. Jungkook scoots on Taehyung's lap until their hips and navels are pressed flush, not a hair's breadth existing between them.

They nearly pant in each other's mouth as the pressure tightens around and in them, in their arcanes that quiver together.

They're so close.

Jungkook could kiss Taehyung, if he was brave enough. He wants to kiss Taehyung so much it hurts and he bites down on his tongue to stop himself from doing so.

Don't kiss him.

Taehyung utters Jungkook's name, a sound that is more of a raspy oath. Jungkook's hands slide beneath the sleeves of Taehyung's shirt to hold onto the arms while Taehyung grips the underside of Jungkook's jaw to tilt his head back, the two unable to keep their hands away from each other for very long.

"You feel good."

Taehyung laps another string of Jungkook's necromancy on the throat and swallows with a sigh. "Yeah? Do you feel full? Content?"

"Mhm… I do, Tae."

It's belated, however Jungkook notices something on Taehyung's right arm that he doesn't get the time to mention yet. He forgets about it, his attention consumed by everything else that Taehyung makes.

A potent gust of wind booms in the forest.

Taehyung's teeth come down on Jungkook's neck. He drinks more of the tattoos but also of the few beads of blood that drip when his fangs sink into the flesh.

"Ah, Taehyung." Jungkook's spine would arch at the pleasing ache if he wasn't held in place by Taehyung, a commanding hand gripping Jungkook's nape, the other anchored on his lower back and keeping them pressed flush. "Tae, I— I feel weird, like something's gonna—" He hisses and whines when Taehyung bites down on his shoulder. "Taehyung, please. You can have all of me, mh? Take more."

I need you to stop talking."

Jungkook hums and wraps his legs around Taehyung. "And why is that, Taehyung?"

"Because I— Fuck. Jungkook. *Jungkook,* why do you—" Taehyung never finishes, busy tasting more of Jungkook's tattoos. He creates another bead of storm that he slips past Jungkook's lips, then, with two fingers pressed on Jungkook's tongue, the others holding the jaw, he moves Jungkook's head to the side. “Why does my name sound so pretty when you say it… Driving me insane.”

"Taehyung," Jungkook teasingly calls when Taehyung's fingers slide from between Jungkook's lips to ghost down his throat. "I feel really weird."

"I know." Taehyung's wind pushes away the strands sticking to Jungkook's forehead.

"You feel so good."

"You too," Taehyung mumbles in the dip of Jungkook's nape. The grip of his fingers tightens around Jungkook. "What if I want this again, Jungkook? You're making me so ravenous, I don't know what to do about it." Taehyung isn't pleased when Jungkook's answer is a simple nod at this. "Use your words for me."

"You can have it," Jungkook sighs, breathless. "Anything."

"Anything I want?" With his mouth, Taehyung traces a path on Jungkook's collarbones where the tattoos are incessantly pooling and reforming.

"*Yes*," Jungkook hisses when teeth graze a pulsating vein in his throat as Taehyung laps and suckles open-mouthed kisses there. "Anything from you too. Everything. 'want it." Taehyung's mouth moves higher up to the angle of the jaw but avoids the sensitive spot. Jungkook exhales, high-strung with a buzz on the verge of collapsing. "Tae… There. I like it there."

"I know," Taehyung chuckles and after skimming away from it.

Jungkook emits a sound of protest, his vision hazy. "Taehyung, ah. Taehyung, m'feeling weird. Feels so good, Tae… Taehyung."

"What do you want? It's yours."

Jungkook's flames continue to pulse out of him, snatching his breath more and more until he can't breathe anymore. He tries to answer. He wants to use his words as Taehyung had requested. He wants to be good for Taehyung, to feel and hear the pleased rumble that will undoubtedly follow, but his throat is too tight and completely locked. His body and muscles are too taut, as though on the edge of something that is waiting to be freed and keeping him trapped until then.

Taehyung caves into Jungkook's request and he nibbles then drags his tongue at the back of Jungkook's lobe, his pants huffing on Jungkook's ear. Shudders keep running through Jungkook one after another, each trailed by the pebbling of his skin as Taehyung rasps his name against his skin.

Jungkook feels revered, and positively *savored.*

"Taehyung," Jungkook pants.

"I've got you."

"Tae, I'm—"

The seventh wave occurs.

Before either of them can prevent it, their arcanes blast outward, accompanied by a pearl of storm fed to Jungkook, and a ribbon of death drank by Taehyung.

The wave blows the leaves away, a few of the trees entirely uprooted and sent to crash down. The grass is burnt in lightning-like strikes amidst the sea of red. Then, there's the air, dense and so palpable that Jungkook feels as though he's drowning underwater.

A deep-seated, unadulterated bliss ruptures within Jungkook.

Energy is sapped out of him. He's boneless when he slackens in Taehyung’s hold, his head lolled forward and his lungs scream for a fare he can't provide. He can't breathe. Everything feels too good. His body doesn't feel like his own. His mind shuts down, unable to formulate a single thought, let alone command it to send air into his lungs.

"Hey, breathe."

Hands cradle Jungkook's face, straightening him up. One skims down to massage his jaw, neck and waist, easing away the tenseness in them.

"Jungkook, breathe. You're alright. *Breathe.* "

And Jungkook does.

He sharply inhales as the lingering tautness in his limbs dissipates. His respiration is uneven but it's there, prompted out of his mouth by the thumbs that brush upon his cheeks.

"Good, so good… Keep breathing for me, yeah?"

Jungkook nods, peering at Taehyung.

"You weren't breathing for a good minute," Taehyung worries through his pants, his brows furrowed. He’s gentle when he lays Jungkook back down, letting his hands smooth the trembles in Jungkook’s limbs with the soothing knead of his fingers. “Fucking hell.”

Jungkook echoes the sentiment with a hum.

“Are you alright?”

Jungkook nods, his voice gone. He feels oddly empty yet full. Satiated. As if his arcane has left him for a brief moment to be replaced by Taehyung’s in the most blissful way.

“I— Uh. I don’t know what happened. Elders… That was… I don't even know what that was. I'm feeling like swearing to your god right now.” Taehyung trails off for a moment to hold himself up on a hand and gaze down at Jungkook, the gold more present in his eyes now, the pupil smaller. “Your arcane feels like it’s mine.”

Jungkook smiles, lazy and happy. He sluggishly lifts his arms to trace the shape of Taehyung's arms. “It is. You drank it. Your arcane made mine yours.”

Taehyung mumbles something intelligible before rubbing his nose on Jungkook’s shoulder. “Don’t say stuff like that.”

“Liking it too much?”

“Yes,” Taehyung admits, open and honest.

“Taehyung,” Jungkook begins, he and Taehyung still breathless and coming down from a high they don't know the countenance of, yet basks into nonetheless.

Taehyung reclines to card his hand through Jungkook’s hair. “What is it?”

Jungkook is about to say more when what he had noticed minutes earlier comes back to his attention.

There are moving marks on Taehyung’s forearms, but also on the back of the hands and fingers.

Jungkook isn’t certain of what they are at first. The lines are light yet sharp, looking more like beige scars that lightning would have left behind. However the more he surveys them and delineates the patterns they draw, the more he understands.

Jungkook exhales a shaky sigh.

The ‘scars’ are a mirror of Jungkook’s sigils.

They shift into messy, haphazard lines, only to gather seconds later and draw the distinct patterns of Jungkook’s tattoos, like a living entity.

All of that on *Taehyung’s* skin.

Taehyung notices it too. He peers at his own hand, then at Jungkook’s, before he ultimately meets Jungkook’s gaze, his own confused.

Wind hollers its approval. However the wind isn’t transparent, it’s of a dark purple, a perfect blend of Jungkook’s necromancy and three of Taehyung’s breaths. It envelops them in tender brushes before floating around them in a nebulous mist.

“Your tattoos. They’re more purple than black too. Your fire as well,” Taehyung adds when Jungkook exhales a small flame. “And mine are—” He breathes out some lightning and fire, both violet. “My breaths are too.”

“I think… I think our arcanes became one for a little while.” Jungkook cradles the back of Taehyung’s neck. “Felt so good. So safe with you.” He sprawls his palms along Taehyung’s arms and he’s able to feel the ‘scars’ on them in the shape of his tattoos. Jungkook’s necromancy feels welcomed by Taehyung, so loved that all he can say is a murmured *'Thank you'.*

Taehyung straightens up and takes Jungkook with him again.

Jungkook immediately wraps his arms around Taehyung’s neck, and he’s still a bit of a puppet when a pressure bumps the back of his head and pushes his face closer to Taehyung’s. He breathes

out a flame and Taehyung does too, both fires of the same color meeting in the middle.

It isn't quite a kiss, but it feels as such to Jungkook.

It's enough to shush the craving to find the answer to this growing question of what kissing Taehyung would feel like.

However Jungkook is so, unbearably, *greedy.*

His head leans forward and tilts to the side. He thinks his lips graze the edge of Taehyung's mouth. He's not certain. His mind is too fuzzy, and his heart is too euphoric to be afraid. Perhaps it's just their arcanes kissing each other, and he can then blame it all on them.

Jungkook's mouth still presses on Taehyung's cheek, closer to the corner of the lips than he had intended, but Taehyung doesn't make it easy to hold back when Jungkook can feel Taehyung's own avarice thrumming alive.

"You felt so good," Jungkook rasps against Taehyung's cheek, dizzied by the way Taehyung's breaths feel like his own. He wiggles his fingers as he tries to summon lightning, feeling as though he could. And he does in a way because tiny bolts crawl up Taehyung's arm to coil around Jungkook's fingers, answering the mute request.

"You did too."

Jungkook buries his face against Taehyung's shoulder. The lightning-like 'scars' are gone from Taehyung, however they lightly reappear when Jungkook allows his flames to graze Taehyung's skin. He smiles to himself. "It's for me only, right?"

"Of course." Taehyung knows what matter Jungkook is speaking of.

"Your chaos is mine, mine is yours too. We can't give them to anyone else," Jungkook slurs, still feeling the effect of their arcanes' embrace.

Taehyung's chuckle is playful, oscillating between their chests. "Is that a threat?"

Jungkook ponders over his answer for a moment.

Is it a threat? He *would* be furious if Taehyung was to give his chaos to someone else. The thought alone renders Jungkook a little mad, his arms tightening around Taehyung.

Taehyung's chaos belongs to Jungkook. No one else. It's how it should be, isn't it? The peace to each other's storms. And it's not as though anyone other than Jungkook can handle Taehyung's chaos. Jungkook is convinced of this.

This part of Jungkook that isn't fully there ignites, prompted forward by the reassurance that bleeds from Taehyung, by the *'Everything's alright, speak freely'* that Taehyung presses against Jungkook's forehead.

Jungkook leans back when he's prompted to by one of Taehyung's hands, but also by another intangible hand that cradles his throat.

"Is it?" Taehyung asks a second time.

“Yes,” Jungkook whispers, too coy for his liking, but he feels so pleasantly exposed under the dragonborn’s scrutiny.

Taehyung’s contentment is tangible, a cocoon of warmth that swathes Jungkook. He leaves a kiss of wind on Jungkook’s temple with two of his fingers, the motion trailed by a *‘Good’* chewed low and so raspy that it raises the hair at the back of Jungkook’s neck.

“Your wind really loves my throat,” Jungkook observes when the arcanic breath encases it in a nebulous, purple necklace.

“My wind breath has always been the more dominant one out of the seven of them. But I never knew it could be this… This assertive and demanding. You seem to bring this out of it.”

“I like it. Makes me feel safe, like nothing wrong can happen to me.” Jungkook's honesty is rewarded by a pressure of the wind on his nape. “Your wind breath is only like this with me, mh?”

“All of them. They never had the personality you’ve brought out of them.”

“I’m so happy we ate the pomegranate... Are you too?” Jungkook asks. Taehyung lightly nods and Jungkook smiles. “Do you like my selfishness?”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“I thought I made it clear by now that dragonborns are horribly possessive creatures by nature.”

Jungkook’s head tips to the side, pleased when Taehyung’s pupils blow out in reaction. He makes a soft sound of amusement. “And I thought I made it clear by now that I enjoy hearing these kinds of things from you.”

"Fucking brat.”

“Right? Imagine how dull your life would be without me.”

Taehyung's smile dampens seconds later. He brushes a strand of Jungkook’s hair that he gently rubs between his fingers before tucking it behind an ear. “I’d rather not imagine that.”

Jungkook emits a happy sigh and he slumps against Taehyung, propping his head on the shoulder.

"Feeling like you've crawled inside my chest?"

"Mhm, I do. S'wonderful." Jungkook feels a pull toward Taehyung, as undeniable as gravity itself. "I don't want this to stop."

"Me either, but…"

It will.

"Maybe not," Jungkook says and answers both of their concerns. "I feel like… Like the door won't ever be fully closed. Because it was different for us. But even if it does, maybe you can open it for me, and I can open it for you."

"We will, so you've got nothing to worry about."

Jungkook nods. "You know," he starts but doesn't finish. He waits for Taehyung to speak, able to feel the way Taehyung's chest rises at every inhalation.

"Yes?"

"I'll be really mad if you give your chaos to someone that isn't me."

"Ah, is that so? How mad would you be?"

"Like... A lot. Very, *very* mad." Jungkook melts under the fondness that he can feel from Taehyung.

"That sounds like a lot."

"Mhm. So you can't give away your chaos."

"And what would you do if I were to give it away to someone else?"

Jungkook tries to think of a response but it's difficult. He's really sleepy. He makes a sound of protest that he muffles against Taehyung when a playful tingle of lightning teases his nape. "You're not supposed to indulge this side of me."

"Which side?"

"The one that isn't fully sane," Jungkook freely admits.

"But what if I like indulging in it?"

"Then… Then you're not fully sane either. That's not good at all, you know." Jungkook cups Taehyung's face, shuffling closer if possible. "That's not good. It really isn't, Tae…" He whispers, his lips so close to Taehyung's, but he knows he can't cross the distance any further.

"It's not?"

Jungkook shakes his head.

"Then why do you sound so happy about it, hm? If it isn't good…" Taehyung trails off to ghost his lips at the back of Jungkook's ear where he speaks. "Why does every negation sound like a plea for more?"

Jungkook can only hide his flaming face in Taehyung's shoulder. He mumbles something however he's too relieved to make any sense. Too happy. He can feel Taehyung's shoulder shake beneath his cheek. Jungkook lazily gnaws on it. "Don't make fun of me."

"Sorry," Taehyung laughs. "You're being very—" He clears his throat. "Very cute."

A heat flushed Jungkook's body and face. "Thanks. You're pretty cute too. Not as much as me, but it's not too bad." Jungkook snickers when Taehyung pinches his ribs.

"You know I'll indulge every side of you, right? Sane or not."

"You shouldn't."

"Why not?" Taehyung asks, and when Jungkook does not answer, he continues "Why don't you listen to mine. What is it telling you?"

Jungkook hears the sound of lightning echoing in his skin. He hears the gust of Taehyung's flames mingling with his own.

He hears a whisper carried by the wind.

It paints a vivid image in his mind, of Taehyung carving his own chest to tuck Jungkook within, keeping him loved and safe from all. It's mad and breathtaking.

The dark, prowling whisper echoes with the one slithering in Jungkook's head. They draw comfort from one another. They find a home in each other: the foundations sturdy with acceptance, the walls made of thoughts only they can understand, and the door opened by a gust of affection that swathes their home.

Jungkook has known for a little while now.

How the first had started for Taehyung's blunt honesty and amusing temper.

The second had been for Taehyung's subtle care that some would deem as too quiet, yet Jungkook has always found it so loud and warm.

It had continued with the power Taehyung withholds in so many different forms: through his people's love and loyalty, but also through his leadership, quick thinking and understanding.

A fourth had been from a tree, a fifth from a cliff in a cave, a sixth from their house's rooftop.

And so many more.

The next, and perhaps most precious one, had been for Taehyung's soul: scared and scarred, wounded and lonely, but one of a kind and so *tender.* The one afterward and last had been for Taehyung's chaos. For its beauty and comfort. These last two are endless, Jungkook has come to realize, both eliciting an ever growing adoration.

Each time, Jungkook has fallen.

Again and again.

He fell and fell and fell and it does not stop. He keeps falling through this abyss that Jungkook would be terrified of if it wasn't wearing Taehyung's name. Taehyung has caught him at each tumble. Jungkook had known Taehyung would.

Now, Jungkook has fallen in love with him, and he does not know if Taehyung will catch him this time.

"My dove is hurting."

"That's a mild way to put it."

Dohyun has to refrain himself from lodging in the warlock's eye the quill tucked in his coat's inner pocket. He still needs him after all. So, he instead peers outside the window of the carriage that is being flown through the sky, the faint sway of the transport vessel doing nothing to mitigate his heartache.

His dove is hurting.

Taehyung should have known better when he had left. *Dohyun* should have known better too because he could have prevented the wound afflicting Taehyung. He could have been saving him all this time as he had in the past, and yet…

"The plague eats dragonborns' souls, a knowledge that I'm certain Dohyun has not graced you with."

"I don't want my husband, his family or Vanae's people to die."

"You've unfortunately exhausted Taehyung and I's patience."

His dove is hurting.

Dohyun's hand balls up into a fist. "Have you learned anything of importance regarding Amaris' Prince?"

"Unfortunately, no, aside from what you already know regarding his birth mother."

Worthless vermin corrupting his dove with his poisonous 'love'.

Dohyun sighs.

Taehyung is even more beautiful than he had thought, he thinks as the scene of Taehyung revealing his hemomancy replays before his eyes. The possibilities of what could be done with his blood runs through Dohyun's mind one after another.

He misses his dove.

"If I may ask," Hajoon begins, "why are you so keen on gaining more knowledge regarding Jungkook's past?"

Dohyun surveys the man, the sounds of the dragon's wings billowing every few seconds. "Because he is a thorn in my side. Unruly and pestilent. He appears to believe my dove belongs to him. I thought he could be of use to me in some ways, perhaps even become a new kind of bird to me, however he has become more of an obstacle between Taehyung and I. I need him gone, however it may be."

"Well… Can't you command one of the warlocks you've hired to get rid of Amaris' heir?"

Dohyun sighs again and slumps against the window as he observes the forest below them. "I doubt it would be so simple. The allegiance he has forced out of Taehyung unfortunately grants Jungkook a layer of protection, and I refuse to wound my dove to bring him back to safety with me. Underestimating Jungkook would be an insidious killer. He *seems* easy to kill, yet he is anything but."

"A bit like you, isn't it?" Hajoon smiles.

Dohyun hums but doesn't say more.

"Still no news from Yumi? I may need her help in the future."

"I haven't been able to contact her since the scuffle between Taehyung and the Council."

"A pity she has left your side. She was quite talented, and her familiars were incredibly useful."

"She will come back eventually." Dohyun's fingers drum on the large wooden box laid next to him. "I found something of interest for her."

Hajoon chuckles. "You mean this?" He nods toward the box.

"Yes."

"What does it contain?"

Dohyun's lips curl upward. "Unique sustenance."

“Do you still want to give me a memory?” Jungkook wonders after what feels like hours where Taehyung has been embracing him. One of Taehyung’s hands hasn’t stopped skimming up and down Jungkook’s spine in mollifying scratches, and Jungkook suspects that he has even dozed off at some point.

“I do. I’m just— I want to give you a good memory. A worthy one.”

“I told you any is more than good. It doesn’t have to be anything grand or special.”

“You think you’ll be able to feel how I do? Like you had during the Night Terrors?”

“I think so,” Jungkook muses and straightens up to peer at Taehyung. “I think I might be able to feel even more now thanks to our gift.”

“Alright.” Taehyung's gaze drifts across Jungkook’s face. “I think I know which ones.”

“Ones? You mean memories plural?”

“Yeah. It… It doesn’t feel right to only give you one memory.”

“You’ll lose them.”

“I know, but you’ll remember them. I was thinking that I could give you some pieces of memories, rather than them as a whole. This way you could have several, and I wouldn’t completely forget them all.”

“I’d really love that.” Jungkook nudges the cushion of Taehyung’s cheek. “I don’t want you to forget them all or one fully. I want to still remember them with you.”

“Pieces of memories, then?”

Jungkook makes a soft sound as he nods.

“The first one I’ll give you will be a bit different from the others, but I… I want you to know how I felt at the time. I want you to believe me.”

Jungkook hugs Taehyung’s face with a palm, his thumb rubbing back and forth on the apple of the cheek and temple. “I understand. I’d love to see you, if you let me.”

“Yeah.” Taehyung lightly nuzzles Jungkook’s palm. “I’d love that too.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Discomfort?”

“A bit, but the good kind, if that makes sense. But it’s alright, I can handle it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I never have to do anything, Viper,” Taehyung retorts with a quirk of his brow. “I’m really fine with it, I promise. If it ever gets too much, I’ll know what word to say, and so do you.”

“I do."

“Viper?”

“Hm?”

“What if I tell you I’m fond of your greed, and that you’re not a burden, do you believe me?”

Jungkook does not have to think long to find his answer. “Yes, but…”

“Not fully,” Taehyung finishes for him.

“I’m sorry.” Jungkook’s lips press into a thin line. He ducks his head, fidgeting with the short hair at the base of Taehyung’s nape. A tap on his chin prompts him to lift his head and meet Taehyung’s gaze. Taehyung’s eyes are gentle, crinkling at the corner.

Jungkook falls a little more.

The hope grows, ever so slowly, no matter how it should not.

Taehyung takes out the tome that he settles on his and Jungkook's lap, the latter still straddling Taehyung's crossed legs. Taehyung freezes on his spot. "I forgot the jar of ink. And a quill."

"I think it might still work if we use something else to write the memory? Revna's venom is usually what I use since it's more convenient than carrying a jar of ink at all times, but Yoongi has recently made some small changes to the book. Although—"

A whistle erupts in the air.

It's not from the wind or rustles of leaves. It sounds human, as if the sound has been made from a mouth.

Jungkook and Taehyung's head swivel to the source of the sound.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I'm not sure."

"A soul?"

Jungkook shakes his head. "I'm not sensing any, or hearing any voices."

"I'm not seeing anything either. Do you—" Taehyung's head jerks backward as something knocks against his forehead then tumbles down. His hand flies to his face. "What?"

Jungkook glances down at the object. It's a quill. "Oh." He picks it up. The quill is mundane, made of a dark wood that has a scarlet tinge to it. "We have a quill?" He shows it to Taehyung.

"Huh? How did it get her—"

The next object that swings at Taehyung falls from the sky and thuds against his head.

This time it's a jar of ink made of glass, its content black.

Jungkook presses his lips together when he catches the way one of Taehyung's eyes twitches.

"Fuck you," Taehyung spits at the forest, a glower etching his face. The insult is answered with a red pine cone that perfectly bumps the center of his forehead again. He snatches it and throws it back in the air. "Fucking bitc—"

"Taehyung!" Jungkook chastises through a chuckle and smacks Taehyung's arm who's furiously rubbing at the pink spot on his forehead.

"I'm being bullied by a forest and you're fucking laughing."

Jungkook bursts into laughter and drops his head on Taehyung's shoulders, tears soon springing in his eyes.

Taehyung heaves a deep, long sigh. "I hate this place. Why is only throwing things at me? What did I even do?"

"I'm not sure, but this confirms to me that Kaiya consciously decided to wake me up," Jungkook says in-between two wheezes. "I think it may have wanted us to be alone when you give me your

memory?”

“ *Why?* And how the fuck could a forest know that, one: we would eat the pomegranate, two: I’d want to give you a memory afterwards, three: that it may have the same effect than during the Night Terror.”

“I don’t know, but as Cahira and Donovan said, Kaiya used to be a place where love, bonds and marriages would be celebrated. Worshiped, even.”

“And? We’re not mat—” Kaiya’s playfulness that had been present at their arrival appears to manifest itself again because the pine cone from before — now missing a few scales — lands on the back of Taehyung’s head. Jungkook breaks into another fit of laughter. “I’m gonna burn this place to the ground.”

Jungkook might lose his breath if he keeps laughing so much, tears rolling down his face and cheeks hurting. He lifts a hand to his face, snickers and giggles escaping his mouth that he tries to muffle. When he eventually manages to open his eyes again and peer at Taehyung in front of him, his laugh quietens into a strangled noise.

Taehyung is staring at him, which isn’t all surprising. But what takes Jungkook off guard is the tender smile that curls Taehyung’s lips, and Jungkook knows Taehyung isn’t aware of its presence. However *Jungkook* can see the smile. He can see the way Taehyung looks at him as he has several times now.

Jungkook feels so beautiful, a stark contrast to how much he used to hate his own smile. Jungkook feels even prettier when Taehyung lowers the hand that had been concealing Jungkook’s mouth, as if Taehyung needs to see more.

Taehyung’s gaze drifts on Jungkook’s lips while his own curve higher.

Jungkook is reminded of the painting in the solarium again.

“I’m ready if you are."

“I am too.” Jungkook opens the book for Taehyung on their lap, his motion cautious and shy. He pulls on the sleeves of his shirt to cover his hands with them. “I think you can just write in it, and then we’ll see what happens?”

“Sounds like one of the best plans we’ve ever made,” Taehyung jests and it relaxes Jungkook who chuckles.

Taehyung flicks the cork off the jar. He takes the quill next that he dips into the vial.

Some of the lightning-like ‘scars’ imitating Jungkook’s tattoos are still present on Taehyung’s arms even if they are slowly beginning to fade away. Jungkook supposes that the door the pomegranate has opened is beginning to close, his and Taehyung’s arcanes calmer now.

Taehyung does not show an ounce of hesitation when he dips the quill in the ink and begins to write on the book.

Jungkook is transported into the memory, everything else vanishing from his view.

He’s standing in the kitchen of Dahee and Junhyun’s house. Taehyung and Jimin are there. Taehyung is hunched over the kitchen counter, a mess of broken plates littering the floor. It doesn’t take long for Jungkook to connect the wedding around Taehyung’s finger, his anguish and the storm outside to the abduction.

“Why don’t you take a quick shower? The spell isn’t over yet, so we’ve got a few hours to spare,” Memory-Jimin says.

Memory-Taehyung hugs Jimin then walks up the stairs.

Jungkook doesn’t need to follow him, the environment shifting on its own. Memory-Taehyung closes the bathroom’s door behind him, Jungkook in it as well. Memory-Taehyung walks further inside and passes through Jungkook as he does.

It’s odd.

To watch Taehyung break down so openly.

Memory-Taehyung trips and stumbles on the ground where he curls in over himself, his sobs sudden and loud, echoing through the empty bathroom.

The feelings Jungkook can experience from Taehyung are so much more vivid than how it had been during the Night Terrors. Here, it’s as though Jungkook *is* Taehyung. Taehyung’s pain is Jungkook's. Taehyung’s tears are Jungkook’s.

Taehyung’s heartbreak is also Jungkook’s.

Jungkook didn’t think it was humanly possible to endure a heartache so agonizing.

There’s a pain in their chests, unrelenting, and Jungkook has to hug himself in the hope to quell it, all in vain. Taehyung gasps for air amidst his aborted sobs. The pain worsens and worsens and it doesn’t seem to stop, wrenching a choked whine and pained pants out of Taehyung.

Memory-Taehyung cries for a while.

He ends up heaving in the toilet a couple times before shakily standing and washing his mouth in the sink with trembling fingers. He looks so sick: skin pale, sweat sticking his shirt to his chest. The pain still doesn’t relent, and it feels as though a part of Jungkook’s soul has been ripped away from him.

The reminder that everything Jungkook is experiencing had once been Taehyung’s feelings snatches his breath away.

The memory continues with Taehyung showering.

The tears don’t really stop until they eventually do.

A certain determination settles within Taehyung. It's ruthless and irrational, yet desperate and single-minded. The bloodthirst is potent, the yearn for revenge is too. Worst of all, the heartbreak suffocates it all, along with Memory-Taehyung and Jungkook both.

It hurts and it is so *real* that Jungkook can’t contain the relief and another misplaced sentiment that elevates in him.

He had been anguished for; missed so dearly and painfully.

Jungkook is taken away from the memory by a hand that brushes his face.

“Hey,” Taehyung whispers. “You're okay?”

“Taehyung,” Jungkook wetly rasps, his vision blurry and throat tight. *Don’t kiss him.* “Taehyung.”

“I know. I know, it’s alright. I know,” Taehyung repeats then pulls Jungkook into a hug. He must be able to feel the misplaced yet honest happiness that swathes Jungkook. “It’s alright to feel like this, yeah?” He breaks the hug to peer at Jungkook, his gaze kind. “I understand.”

Three little entities dance on the tip of Jungkook’s tongue. He pushes them aside to instead say “I really love your chaos.”

Relief that isn’t Jungkook’s flows within him.

“Thank you for loving it. I enjoy your chaos too, and everything that comes with it.” The gentleness of Taehyun's words is echoed by the brush of his lips on Jungkook’s forehead that is hopefully not accidental. “Are you ready for the next piece?”

Jungkook wipes his eyes. “Depends. Am I gonna cry again?”

Taehyung chuckles. “Technically, you shouldn’t be. The others are… You’ll see. I just want— I *need* you to see them through my eyes,” he says, echoing what he had told Jungkook in the solarium.

“Why?”

The same look of confusion that had taken Taehyung’s face before they ate the pomegranate reappears again. “I don’t know.”

Jungkook smiles. “It’s okay. I understand too. I’m ready.”

“Yes?”

“Mhm.”

“That wasn’t a yes or no.”

Jungkook squirms a bit, pleased at Taehyung’s insistence. “Yes, Taehyung.”

“Good.”

Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip to hide his smile. He observes Taehyung dip the quill in ink to write a word, then a second and more, soon filling a full page then a second with detailed descriptions. Jungkook doesn’t read any of them.

He waits to be transported in the scenes. Some are familiar, others not so much. They flicker before his eyes one after another, like watching a mural of fleeting paintings.

Jungkook still remembers the gift hanging in the solarium, the happiness and hope that had awoken that day.

As he watches it all unfold through Taehyung’s eyes, Taehyung’s feelings and thoughts become Jungkook's.

In some pieces of memories…

This won’t do.

Taehyung had thought he could buy some golden paint to make his job easier, but it’s too diluted and not golden enough. *It’s ugly,* he childishly thinks. Plus it’s not something *he* has made which displeases him even more. Buying the canvas had been fine, and sketching the portrait with the paints he had bought had also been alright at first, however as the painting had evolved, using materials that he had not crafted and brought to life himself had not been good enough.

Taehyung couldn’t settle for anything but the best.

So when Jungkook is peacefully asleep in their bed, Taehyung grinds expensive chunks of color into powder to then make his own paint. He takes his time with it. He doesn’t want to half-ass his gift for Jungkook.

Plus Taehyung must admit that the ‘reptile part of his brain’ — as Jungkook would say — quite enjoys the idea that everything he has made to create the painting was done from scratch *by him.*

Saved for the canvas, but Taehyung decides to ignore this matter.

Taehyung does a terrible job at ignoring the canvas matter.

So he not only ends up cutting and building the frame and backboard himself, but he also makes the yarns of cotton and spends a horrendously large amount of time weaving the yarns together into a proper canvas fabric.

It had been pretty fun, all things considered, but Taehyung’s cheeks were a tad too warm during the process because why in *hell* is he doing all of this? It's absurd.

Nevertheless, the canvas is redone. By him. And it pleases 'the reptile part of his brain' even if he has to redo the sketch again.

“Good work. Get home.”

Taehyung *needs* to be home too.

Today has been atrocious like the past few days. He’s cranky, and if someone asks him another unnecessary question like *‘Leader, is everything okay?’,* he might end up shoving his hat of Vanae’s future leader down their throat.

Taehyung has just been in a horrible mood lately, and he has no idea why.

The worst is that his hunting squadron has caught onto it.

“Yo. Why has he been so pissy today?” Youngjae not so quietly 'whispers' on the other side of the hut.

“No clue,” Minjae answers.

“Weren’t you and Rowoon annoying?” Yeji wonders.

“Hey! We did nothing for once,” Minjae objects. “We noticed he didn’t seem well, so we’ve been good.”

“What is it then?”

“Hasn’t Jungkook left for Amaris for a couple days?” Mira interjects.

A chorus of *‘Aaah’* and *‘Makes sense’* and *‘Isn't Leader so cute?’* erupts in the room, trailed by shared laughter.

Taehyung wishes to be graced by whatever blessed clarification that has struck the group of hunters, but instead he’s left to wallow in his own ire that he doesn't remember having ever been this bad in a long, *long* time.

Taehyung tunes out the rest of the conversation as he leaves.

He flies to his and Jungkook’s house then walks in through the solarium. He checks the time. It’s 6:30 pm.

Jungkook should be back in a few hours. Hopefully.

First, Taehyung kills time by showering. Then he carefully cuts some wood of the highest quality he has gotten the chance to find and buy. Afterwards, he goes up to the bedroom and grabs a chest from underneath that he opens, displaying the array of precious gems and geodes inside.

Taehyung sits there and spends the next hours painstakingly sorting through them. It doesn't quite satisfy him. He might need to leave and dig in a cave to find new ones.

Once done, he puts everything into a bag and walks down to the solarium where the expensive pieces of wood await him. Taehyung begins to carve but nothing is going right. His temper is flaring up too much for his liking, fed by his growing frustration and the way his breaths angrily snap in his pouch.

Lost in his own mind, he startles when the front door swings open.

He curses under his breaths and swiftly hides everything in a box that he covers with one of the failed canvas fabric sheets.

Jungkook heaves a deep sigh. “I love visiting Amaris, but it’s always so exhausting,” he murmurs to himself.

Akin to a powerful arcanic spell, Taehyung’s sour mood brightens at the sound of the familiar voice. Which is ridiculous, in retrospect, because it's just Jungkook, not some kind of deity gracing Taehyung with his presence.

However when Taehyung joins Jungkook in the living room, he can't help but think of how Jungkook's beauty would put to shame the one of a deity. It's another ridiculous thought to have, but he's too happy to be embarrassed about it.

Taehyung draws a small smile when he sees Jungkook standing in the living room. “Hey.”

Jungkook looks up after removing his shoes. “I didn’t think you’d still be up. It’s late.”

“It’s not that late.”

“It’s nearly 4 am, Taehyung."

Taehyung is perfectly aware of this. He *has* been checking the clock in the solarium a couple dozen times. Or rather a couple dozens, or even hundreds but he tries to ignore this. “Right.”

“Were you waiting for me?” Jungkook teases as Taehyung removes Jungkook’s winter coat for him.

“As if.” Taehyung has been occupied, is all, and enjoying himself inhaling coffee after coffee to remain awake. He hadn’t even been sure of when Jungkook would be back to begin with, so there hasn’t been any reason for him to wait around.

Ah.

Taehyung is in a much better mood. So much so that he could even handle Minjae and Rowoon’s unbearably flirtatious behavior if the two lovebirds were around. He would even be alright with Woobin’s presence, but he promptly dismisses the thought when he's reminded of the rat's interest in Jungkook.

“Bread?”

“Yeah.” Taehyung hugs Jungkook when the latter approaches him, and what remnant of annoyance Taehyung still had in him now vanishes into nothing. “Had a good time?”

“Mhm,” Jungkook begins, then launches himself into a detailed recount of his trip to Amaris.

Taehyung carefully listens to every word as he fixes a cup of tea for them. Jungkook is quite beautifully dressed today again, everything about him exuding royalty and confidence. Taehyung feels the urge to paint him again when Jungkook tousles his hair after running a hand through it, the strands now a little messy.

“I’m glad to be back here though,” Jungkook says after a while. “And I’m really excited for our upcoming hunting trip with the kids. I can't wait to meet them and the members of your hunting squadron for the first time.”

“Was Seohyung at the citadel?”

“She wasn’t, thankfully. She’s been apparently busy. I was still eager to be in Vanae again.”

Taehyung snorts. “I thought you had a good time.”

“Yes, but that does not mean I didn’t miss you."

It's said playfully, but Taehyung catches the sincerity in the words. He glances at him then at his now empty cup of tea. “You’re too honest.”

“Did you miss me?”

Taehyung thinks back on how boring everything has been while Jungkook has been away. He mulls over his — formerly — sour mood and how improved it is now. “I was busy with my squadron.”

“Aah, how did it go?”

Taehyung is grateful for the way Jungkook gracefully changes the subject. The two converse together while Taehyung prepares them a late night snack, the house feeling warm and lively anew.

The painting is done.

The trip to Kaiya is in a few days.

Taehyung is scared.

“It needs to be *perfect.* I can’t settle for less than that. And I’ve been working on it for a while now but every time I look at it, it feels like something is missing. Another issue that rose along the way is that I added a few things later on that I had to alter and redo several times. But what do you think of it overall? Is it too much? I worried about that as well when I started adding these.” Taehyung points at a part of the painting. “But he’s so… So bright and regal and intricate and genuinely the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. So the painting has to be equally grand to even pretend to be a representation of him. ‘Cause he’s… You know. Jungkook. The Viper. Although, doesn’t it pale in comparison? It kinda does, doesn’t it? Maybe I should redo it.”

But Taehyung doesn't know when he'll have the time again.

“Does it even look like him? I’m not sure of anything anymore. I've looked at it too much. Plus it's not as if it'll look as pretty as he does in real life. I don’t think *anyone* could ever create a piece of art that would compare to him but. Uh. I worked hard on it. And I did everything myself from scratch: from the canvas to the paint to the frame to the pieces of wood. I even got the gems myself ‘cause I didn’t like those that I already had in my hoard. Is it good enough? Do you think it’s a bad time to give it to him? Should I wait after Kaiya? I mean he was abducted and only came back a

few days ago. Maybe this is the worst time to give it to him, actually.” Taehyung nervously glances at his mother who has remained silent all this time.

Taehyung hasn’t left the house or allowed anyone in it since Jungkook’s return after his abduction, but he has been needing an opinion on the painting lest he loses his mind.

“Mom?”

“Taehyung…” Dahee is observing the painting from where she’s standing outside the solarium in the garden, respectful of Taehyung’s boundaries. “I cannot describe into words how wonderful this piece of art is.”

“Oh... So it may be good enough to give it to him, then?"

"It is more than good, idiotic son."

Taehyung pouts. “Alright. Thanks.”

“Hasn’t it been years since you last painted?”

“It has, but that day he was… He was breathtaking,” Taehyung whispers, unable to speak the words any louder. He thinks back on the curiosity that had been ignited in him, and how it hasn’t relented since, but has instead grown and grown. “I had to paint him.”

“He will love it, Son.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain,” Dahee fondly smiles, and there’s a pride in it that heats Taehyung's cheeks.

“Is there anything you think I should remove or add? I haven’t carved the frame where the painting will be attached to yet. I’m waiting to receive the silver and gold powders. But I’m still undecided on what to do with the frame. I might just paint it black so that it doesn’t take away from the painting itself? And it could look nice with his tattoos? Plus he loves black. Or should I—”

“Son. Come here.”

Taehyung slowly trudged out of the solarium to join his mother.

“My son,” Dahee starts and cups his face. “You have nothing to worry about. Jungkook will adore this gift. I promise.”

“Alright,” Taehyung sighs, but he’s still a tad anxious. “Thank you.”

“When you are done with it and the frame, make sure to give it to Jungkook when it is bright outside, as the sunlight will shine on it and become one with the painting. He must see it in the same way you saw him: in their full beauty. Understood?”

Taehyung nods. “Understood.”

Taehyung can be a bit of a wimp, which isn't news to him.

But still.

He has been chickening out day after day. Whenever he believes that he has mustered the courage to show the gift to Jungkook, something gets in the way.

Mainly his cowardice.

On a good note, even the frame is completed now, made of a pristine ivory. So the painting is fully done. The only thing left is to show it to Jungkook, which has proven itself to be the most difficult task. It may never happen at this point. Taehyung might impulsively destroy it.

He sighs to himself, leaning over the railing of the balcony.

A gasp erupts in the bedroom behind him. His head swivels around and he sees Jungkook spring up.

Taehyung rushes back inside, closing the glass door on his way. He sits on the edge of the bed and wipes the sweat beading on Jungkook's forehead and temples.

A nightmare again.

Jungkook slowly exhales and inhales before slumping forward, drawing his legs up and curling his arms around them.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Jungkook sniffles and wipes his face with his shirt. "Was just the bathroom. And the usual stuff she'd say to me. It was my birthday, and that day I had made the mistake of asking if I'd be receiving a gift. Foolish child," he adds, but it doesn't sound like himself. His gaze is distant for a moment, as though listening to a voice that isn't here. "I'm fine. Just need to think about something else."

It's the middle of the night.

It's dark outside and inside, the moon hidden by the clouds. It's raining too, the pitter-patter drowning the house. It's possibly the worst time to show his gift to Jungkook. And yet, Taehyung speaks, too chewed and coy for his liking.

"I finished the painting."

Jungkook's head lifts to look at Taehyung. "The one you've been working on for a while?"

"Yeah. That one. Do you want to see it?"

Jungkook draws a smile that is small and tired.

Taehyung hopes his gift will help, even if only a little bit.

He takes Jungkook's hand and leads him first to the bathroom where he helps Jungkook clean himself from the sweat and then change to a new top.

Then, Taehyung guides Jungkook down the stairs and to the solarium. He flicks some fireballs at the lanterns dangling from the ceiling. The flickering flames lighten the area in a dim, golden light that reflects on the glass walls.

Taehyung releases his hold of Jungkook's hands. He walks up to the large painting that is covered with a bed sheet. The creature that is his nervousness gnaws at his mind. What if Jungkook hates it? Maybe he'll be offended by the gift, actually.

This has been a terrible idea.

What has Taehyung been thinking? He shouldn't have—

"Taehyung?"

Taehyung's muscles tense around a startle. His gaze darts on Jungkook who's standing in the solarium.

Jungkook is dressed in wrinkled pajama pants and an old hoodie belonging to Taehyung. The latter is riddled with holes and burnt marks, but it has somehow become one of Jungkook's favorite sweaters to wear. His hair is tousled from his restless sleep, eyes the slightest bit red. Jungkook hasn't adorned any jewelry or fancy clothes, yet he still remains so impossibly beautiful.

The painting truly is a terrible idea.

"This is a gift for you," Taehyung croaks out.

"What?"

Taehyung's lips press into a thin line. Then he blows out a puff of air as he shuffles on his feet and crosses his arms over his chest. His gaze cast down on the floor. "I made this for you." The creature is virulent and ripping at a part in Taehyung's chest when Jungkook's mood visibly brightens.

Jungkook looks so fucking happy, and the gift doesn't feel good enough anymore. Taehyung knows that Jungkook had not been allowed to receive any gifts when he had been young with Seohyung. It's part of why he had needed the painting to be close to perfection, to be something that Jungkook would be happy to receive, but doubts run through Taehyung's head one after another.

Is the gift too ostentatious? Is it too on the nose? Isn't it weird to give someone a painting of themselves?

"You made a gift for me? Really?" Jungkook sounds awestruck, as if he doesn't quite believe Taehyung's words.

"Yeah. Really." Taehyung extends a hand toward Jungkook, half to prompt Jungkook to join him, and half to receive some perhaps unwarranted comfort. The two of them are facing the concealed canvas now. "I—" Taehyung's throat clicks when he swallows. "I hope you like it? And if you don't, it's alright. You can tell me. I'll understand."

"Taehyung." Jungkook squeezes Taehyung's hand, their gazes finding each other. "Of course I'll love it. It's a gift from you."

“But I want you to like it regardless of it being a gift from me.”

“I’ll love it, Tae. I’m sure of it. I already do.”

You haven’t seen it yet, Taehyung does not say out loud.

“I’m curious because you told me that what you were painting was something important.”

All of a sudden, Taehyung is struck by the fact that *this* is why he has been so terrified of showing the painting to Jungkook. It’s opening himself up in a way he never has with anyone else. It’s so much. Too much, really.

“It is,” Taehyung rasps. “Important, I mean.”

Jungkook hums and lets go of Taehyung to pensively peer at the bed sheet covering the canvas, a hand lifting to his mouth to tap on his lower lip. “Is the subject of your painting some kind of treasure to you?”

Taehyung opens and closes his mouth. He clasps his clammy hands behind himself, one of them gripping onto the wrist of the other. He doesn’t know what to answer.

“Oh! Is it Revna?” Jungkook says with a teasing grin.

Taehyung huffs a weak chuckle. “No. It’s not Revna.”

“You love her a lot. If what you painted *is* a treasure to you, then it’d make sense for it to be her.”

“Shut up,” Taehyung mumbles, his face a little warm.

Jungkook takes a step closer to the easel where the canvas is propped on. Taehyung’s heart speeds up. “Is it the sky? It’s precious to you.”

Taehyung wants to reply, but the answer that floats on his tongue is so damn confusing because why is his first thought to say that the subject of the painting is growing to become more precious than the sky?

“Sorry,” Jungkook says after a glance at Taehyung. “I’m really curious, and I was wondering if I could guess what it’s about. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You’re not making me uncomfortable. I’m just a bit lost and—” And scared. “You can still try to guess, if you can.”

Jungkook scoffs.

Taehyung smiles when he catches the flare of defiance that sparks in Jungkook at the challenge.

“Is it an object or alive?”

“The answer would make it too easy.”

“So it’s probably alive,” Jungkook concludes with a pompous curl of his lips.

“Cunning viper.”

Jungkook has the audacity to laugh. “You never answered.”

“Uh?”

“Is the subject of the painting something precious to you?”

Taehyung has half a mind to lie, but Jungkook deserves better than that. He nods after a beat, not trusting his tightened vocal chords.

“Is it not Revna?”

Taehyung shakes his head.

“Is it Jimin? Your parents?”

Taehyung shakes his head again, refusing to look at Jungkook.

Jungkook makes a few more guesses. To Taehyung’s shock, Jungkook doesn’t consider himself as an option. It doesn’t seem to cross his mind that *he* could be the painting’s subject and that, by extension, he can be someone that Taehyung sees as precious.

It emboldens Taehyung.

Perhaps gifting this to Jungkook isn’t such a bad idea.

“This is hard,” Jungkook frowns through a pout. “You said it’s precious! And it’s a gift for me. Is it jewelry? Or another one of your gifts that shall not be mentioned?”

Taehyung clicks his tongue and zaps a snickering Jungkook. “Stop it.”

Jungkook’s smile softens. “Is it?”

“No.”

“Are you playing with words? Is it related to gemstones, hence it being precious? Maybe it’s about this dragonborn land where a plethora of precious gems, geodes and minerals grow. I still really want to visit it.”

“It’s…” Taehyung thinks back on their stay at Amaris’ library. “It… It can— Uhm. I suppose that — That uh. That it can be seen as a gem. In a way. Kind of,” he mumbles and he feels so damn absurd for saying this but Jungkook had shone so bright that day, bathed by the golden sunlight.

“Really?”

Taehyung nods.

“May I see it? I can’t wait anymore.”

Another nod.

“Are you sure?”

Taehyung can’t help but smile. “I am.”

Jungkook walks to the back of the canvas.

Taehyung's heart beats in his throat. Jungkook slowly tugs on the bed sheet, entirely removing it from the painting. He rounds the easel. Taehyung shuffles to the side, giving space to Jungkook. Jungkook halts in front of his gift, still holding onto the bed sheet.

The painting is one of the sights Jungkook had made at Amaris' library, of the vision he had painted before Taehyung's eyes.

The background isn't as much as one, only blurry outlines of shelves and books. It isn't the focus of the painting, after all.

Jungkook is.

Jungkook's black clothes are hugging the sharp and softer curves of his body, the corset striking a harmonious contrast to his honeyed skin. His hair flows over his forehead and cheeks, framing his face with soft waves, one of them tucked behind the ear.

Taehyung remembers as clear as day how entranced he had been by the water-like reflection of the sun whenever its rays would tumble on Jungkook's shoulders, and by the delicate shadows Jungkook eyelashes would cast on his cheeks.

The jewelry had been what had taken the most time to Taehyung. He had started with the earrings, then the shoulder jewelry, all carved into a wood that Taehyung had carefully sculpted in a way to make it seamlessly blend with the rest of the painting, where the ends of a piece flattens into the canvas and becomes one with it.

It looks as though the wooden jewelry painted in gold and silver are peeking out of the painting, like treasures floating on water.

Taehyung had pondered a lot on where to put which gem for the jewelry, planning ahead how the sun would catch the light, and only then leaving to the mountains to retrieve the precious stones that are now attached to the wooden armatures. He had found — and begrudgingly bought — an array of colorful gems: diamonds of all kinds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, jadeites and more.

He had tried his best to arrange the pieces of wood jewelry and gems as beautifully as possible, akin to how they had been on Jungkook in his memory. Some parts of it have taken the shape of drops at the arms, like veils of precious gems draped over Jungkook.

The last gem he had added had been black diamonds. Taehyung is usually not fond of these, but while making the painting, he had known that they would perfectly fit with it.

Then, there's Taehyung's favorite part: Jungkook's tattoos.

They're laced around Jungkook's naked arms, shoulders and throat, all praised by the black diamonds that are sporadically peppering a curl, a line or a ring of ink. He had not added a lot. Just enough to catch the light and draw the eye on the tattoos, on how breathtaking Jungkook's necromancy truly is.

Taehyung has worked so hard on his gift, but he seems to have been right when he had thought it was not good enough.

Jungkook doesn't look happy.

If anything, he appears upset, and something sinks within Taehyung.

Jungkook steps backward, his mouth part open before clicking shut. The shadows of the lanterns' flames dance across his skin. "I don't understand."

"What—" Taehyung slowly exhales to pacify the rapid pulsations of his heart. "What do you not understand?"

"You said the subject of the painting is something precious to you."

"It is," Taehyung answers, so quiet that he's not sure if Jungkook has heard him.

"But it's me. It's *me* ." Jungkook whispers, his voice breaking on the last word. His eyes shine with unshed tears. "Were you talking about the jewelry? Or the gems you've used? Or—"

"It's about you."

Jungkook stares at Taehyung. His breath hitches, his brows furrowed.

"That day in the library… It was all I could think about. I needed to paint you, so I did. And then I got carried away with the gems and the wooden addition because nothing was pretty enough. Regal enough. Bright enough. Nothing was translating well enough how… How breathtaking you were," Taehyung murmurs, and he feels so overwhelmed for reasons he can't explain. "Nothing was *you* enough. Until it finally felt like it was. And I'm not saying that you aren't beautiful every day but I swear to the Elders and to your God that this afternoon at Amaris, you—"

"You painted me."

Taehyung nods, the rest of his words vanishing from his mind.

"Is this how you saw me that day?"

"Not only this day."

Jungkook's fingers tighten around the bed sheet that feels like a protective wall between him and Taehyung. "I don't look like this."

"You do." Taehyung's hand jerks forward in an aborted motion to touch Jungkook.

Jungkook shakes his head. "This can't be me."

"Why not?"

"Because Seohyung would—" Jungkook emits a derisive, wet chuckle as some of the tears escape his eyes. He steps away when Taehyung eventually tries to reach out to him.

"Jungkook. It *is* you."

"But—" Jungkook shakes his head.

"I know."

“You don’t.”

“It’s you. It’s your arcane too.”

“But it can’t be me.”

“Why?”

“Because I look so beautiful through your eyes,” Jungkook says through quiet tears, voice thin. “Do you even realize?”

“Realize what?”

“You don’t even realize how lo—” Jungkook never finishes.

Taehyung's confusion grows. “I’m not— I’m not following.”

Jungkook looks pained as his head tilts to the side. He sighs and averts his gaze.

“But I painted it, didn’t I?” Taehyung tries.

Jungkook’s gaze finds Taehyung’s anew. It’s searching, and Taehyung hopes it finds its answers. “Is this really how you see me?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to translate how I see you.” Because Taehyung is lost and scared. “But it comes close to it.”

Jungkook peers at the painting again, his gaze darting across it. He’s tentative when he walks closer to it. The pulp of his fingers brush upon a piece of wooden jewelry, drifting over a fire opal, a blue sapphire, then a black diamond.

The bed sheet falls to the ground.

Jungkook touches more of the painting with both hands, and Taehyung can see the slow acceptance that loosens the tenseness in the shoulders.

Even now the painting feels mundane compared to the real Jungkook.

“You carved the jewelry,” Jungkook murmurs.

“They were painted at first, but I didn’t like it. I guess I’m still a bit skittish after your abduction, but painting them, It made you feel too inaccessible.”

“Inaccessible?”

“Too far away. Too unreal. When I was carving, I felt like… Like I could touch you in a way. Like I could catch you if you were to fall.” Taehyung rubs a hand down his face. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Jungkook’s eyes widen for a split second before his expressions smoothes out. He turns toward Taehyung and he steps over the bed sheet to reduce the distance between them. He grabs a hold of Taehyung’s hands that he shyly places on his waist. Taehyung responds to the mute request as he curls his arms around him.

“You can touch me. You can catch me too. You've done it many times,” Jungkook says and cradles Taehyung’s neck as Taehyung pulls him in his arms, pressing him flush against him. “I love it, Taehyung. I love it so much. I’m sorry for reacting the way I did. It took me off guard and… I wasn’t expecting that at all. I didn't even fathom it could be me.”

“It’s alright.” Relief swarms Taehyung. “I’m happy you like it, if you do.”

“I do. I really do, I promise. You’re just—”

Jungkook reclines and his gaze is so open and full of palpable affection that Taehyung would look away if he wasn’t relishing in the reassurance it brings him.

Jungkook truly liked his gift.

“You can be so much sometimes without knowing or realizing, but in the best way possible,” Jungkook continues. "I'm just emotional. ‘Cause I’m very happy. The happiest. No one ever— No one ever did something like this for me. That must have taken so much time. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Taehyung says and he’s hit once more by how relieved he is to have Jungkook back with him.

Jungkook peers at the painting. A smile graces his lips. “You even drew my tattoos.”

“I hadn’t at first, but I added them after the scenting clusterfuck.” Taehyung clears his throat at Jungkook’s chuckle. He dutifully avoids Jungkook’s eyes. “Your tattoos were really pretty, and I wanted to add them.”

“How did you even remember them? I don’t think you’ve forgotten or misplaced a single line. Even I wouldn’t be able to do this.”

Tarhyung shrugs to dismiss the embarrassment that warms up his neck. “I like your necromancy. That includes your tattoos.”

Jungkook’s reaction to this is strange because his face flushes, a pink hue coloring his cheeks and tips of the ears that he hides when he drops his head on Taehyung’s shoulder. “You painted me.”

“I know.”

“You said the subject of the painting could be seen as a gem,” Jungkook mumbles in the dip of Taehyung’s throat.

“I—”

Elders.

If only Taehyung had an ice breath to abate the heat that creeps up his chest.

“I mean—” Why had Taehyung even made that comparison in the first place? “S’whatever.”

Jungkook’s shoulders shake for a moment before he pulls away from the hug to study the painting again, tracing some of the details.

“Are you happy?”

“The most.” Jungkook touches the intricate jewelry on the shoulder. “It’s breathtaking.”

It's stupid how Taehyung can’t refrain himself from thinking that Jungkook is the one to be breathtaking. It’s staggering, dizzying, how important Jungkook has grown to be to Taehyung, how Taehyung’s own greed expands in result, seeking Jungkook’s, yet not knowing how to request its presence.

“When was the last time you painted?”

“Over a decade, I think. Maybe more. I don’t really enjoy the process of painting, but I did with this one.”

“A decade?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised you were inspired enough after so long.”

“I found a muse in you.”

Jungkook doesn't speak. His gaze, the way he embraces Taehyung, and the few tears that fall on Taehyung's shoulder is enough of an answer.

Taehyung hopes that Jungkook can find beauty in himself and his necromancy. And perhaps Jungkook does because raven tattoos spread across his skin, mirroring those of the painting.

“I want to hang it here,” Jungkook begins minutes later, “for the sun to be out.”

Anything.

“I want to see it tomorrow morning. With you.” Jungkook and Taehyung are both the one to reduce the distance between them this time, their hands finding their place on each other. “I want to go to bed right now, and fall asleep in your arms. I want—” Jungkook pauses, as though wanting to say more. “I want it,” he finishes, even if it feels as if he has more he wishes to say. “I want *it*, Taehyung."

Taehyung doesn't know what this 'it' is that Jungkook speaks of.

But he listens.

He listens and carries Jungkook's hand to his lips.

"Anything," Taehyung promises against Jungkook's knuckles.

An oath he vows to fulfill, for however long he breathes.

◯◯ Present time ◯◯

It takes a while for Jungkook to extricate himself from the next fragment of memory.

Memory-Taehyung wakes up before Memory-Jungkook. He shuffles toward Jungkook who had seemingly drifted away during their sleep, and he cradles Jungkook back in his arms, tucking him close against his chest. Taehyung's relief and happiness is tangible as they remain like this for a couple hours, Jungkook fast asleep and Taehyung refusing to leave their bed.

Memory-Taehyung does leave at some point to visit the bathroom. When he comes back, he sits at the edge of the bed, his gaze falling on a still sleeping Memory-Jungkook.

Jungkook breathes out as he watches the way Memory-Taehyung tenderly cards his hand through Memory-Jungkook's hair. Memory-Taehyung's motions are so gentle that he does not even wake up Memory-Jungkook with them. It doesn't appear to be his objective.

It seems that Memory-Taehyung simply wants to touch Memory-Jungkook.

Memory-Jungkook eventually awakens. Taehyung washes Jungkook's hair then cooks them some breakfast, the peace that settles in Memory-Taehyung's chest growing the more he takes care of Memory-Jungkook.

Then, Memory-Taehyung guides them to the solarium.

The sun has already begun to rise. It basks the room in shades of oranges, pinks and purples, but it also bathes the painting, its gems reflecting the sunrays.

"It's even more beautiful now," Memory-Jungkook says.

"Yeah," Memory-Taehyung answers, but his gaze riveted on Jungkook rather than on the painting, *"it is."*

Jungkook revels in all that Taehyung has gifted him: the painting, his care, his attention, and the pieces of memories that will live with Jungkook from now on.

Memory-Taehyung is so fond of Memory-Jungkook.

Of me, Jungkook thinks with unadulterated wonder. *Taehyung is fond of me.*

"Something like that," Taehyung says and *oh.*

Jungkook must have spoken out loud.

"Welcome back." Taehyung strokes Jungkook's spine with a hand, his other one kneading at Jungkook's nape, each pressure bringing Jungkook more and more to the present.

Jungkook feels even more boneless than earlier, as if he has reached another kind of high, but this one feels more soft and aerial.

He doesn't speak for a while.

Instead, he allows his arcane to speak for him, to chat with Taehyung's in electric and nebulous words only they can understand.

Jungkook thinks he has dozed off again at some point because when he comes to himself once more, the door the pomegranate had created doesn't feel as open anymore.

The forest is almost pitch black around them now, saved for the lightning that has now brightened back to its original color. The tiny bolts still try to mingle with the flames of Jungkook's necromancy, disappearing in their midst but flickering here and there like small fireflies.

Jungkook feels more like himself and less like Taehyung. His thoughts and feelings become his own as well as he slots back into them.

"It's fading away," Jungkook whispers.

"It is."

Jungkook sighs. "I don't want the door to close."

"I don't think it'll ever be fully closed, as you said."

Jungkook hums in agreement and brushes his nose against Taehyung's throat. He leans back and he can't see much of Taehyung's face until a bolt of lightning coils around them.

"The door will be left ajar."

Jungkook emits a soft noise as he smiles and presses a kiss on Taehyung's cheek. "Yes, Taehyung. Thank you for… Thank you." All of a sudden, he's reminded of the fragments of memories. "Are they gone? The memories?"

"They are. I know I gave you the painting, and I remember bits and pieces, but there are some dark areas. I don't fully recall how it went when I gave you the gift, only that we left to go to bed after all."

"I got very emotional because of how beautiful I saw myself through your eyes, but you handled it and reassured me really well. You…" Jungkook hides his face on Taehyung's shoulder when a warmth pats his cheeks. "God… I can't believe you indirectly called me that."

"Hm? Called you what?"

Jungkook hesitates but then he says "You indirectly called me a gem. I mean. You didn't actually call me 'gem', but you said that the subject of the painting could be seen as some kind of gem. And *I* am the subject of it. So, by extension, you called me a gem," Jungkook mumbles and smacks Taehyung when the latter laughs. "Stop mocking me." He reclines to survey Taehyung as best as he can through the ambient darkness. He can still feel a thread of Taehyung's feelings, this time of amusement. "You did indirectly call me this."

"And is that a problem, Gem?"

Jungkook stills.

His mouth closes around a strangled squeak. "W-What is wrong with you?!"

Taehyung bursts into laughter.

“I’m leaving!” Jungkook springs on his feet and away from Taehyung, an abrupt movement that he regrets when a dizziness makes him sway on his spot. His fall is prevented by Taehyung who steadies him in time.

“Are you alright, Ge—”

“Stop it!”

Taehyung snorts.

“Escort me back to the hut. Promptly,” Jungkook demands, his face aflame and an arm looped around Taehyung’s.

“Of course, my Prince.” Taehyung summons a ball of fire that he tosses in the air in front of them to guide them through the forest. The flames aren’t purple anymore, but they are still a bit darker than how they usually would be. “What if I—”

“No. Don’t talk.”

Taehyung snickers.

They both fall mute as they begin their walk back to Cahira and Donovan’s house.

Jungkook’s embarrassment subdues. He observes with a certain fondness the way his flames poke at the fireball, only to dart off when Taehyung's fire chases after it and temporarily leaves Jungkook and Taehyung in darkness.

Jungkook peers at Taehyung’s hand, noticing the absence of the lightning-like ‘scars’. He can still distantly feel Taehyung, but it is more of an enhanced empathy rather than the synthesis from before. It doesn’t feel that different from how it usually is between them, actually, and Jungkook can’t help but smile to himself when he’s struck by how close he and Taehyung have grown to be.

Jungkook hums a lullaby under his breath. He turns his head when he feels eyes on him. “What?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“You were staring.”

“And?”

“And why were you staring?”

“Am I not allowed to stare at you?”

“It’s a bit creepy to silently stare at your husband like this."

“And what else am I supposed to do when my husband is beautiful?”

Jungkook gawks at Taehyung. “Can you *stop?”*

Taehyung snorts. “You get flustered so easily. It’s fucking hilarious to watch.”

“I hate you so much,” Jungkook grumbles.

“He says, tucking himself closer to me.”

“Taehyung!” Jungkook reprimands but it’s rendered nulled by the chuckle that coats his voice as he peers at Taehyung who laughs so freely. "You're annoying."

A smile floats on Taehyung’s lips. “You’re b—”

A resounding, pained holler races through the forest.

Jungkook comes to a halt. Taehyung does too. Jungkook's head swivels around. His gaze darts across the dark veil of the forest but he can't see anything nor anyone. Jungkook's hands fly up to his ears. "It's happening again. The—"

"—dragon's roar."

Jungkook peers at Taehyung. "You can hear it?"

"Faintly? I think. I—"

When the cry tears through the silence a second time, forlorn and stronger than it has ever been, Taehyung also placates his palms against his ears in an effort to muffle it. "Fuck."

"Why can you hear it?" Jungkook shouts over the wail.

"I don't fucking know. Might be because of the pomegranate. I can still feel your arcane."

Jungkook's tattoos and flames are erratic as one restlessly drifts across his skin while the other snaps in the air. Taehyung's breaths also join the raven flames, his lightning, wind and fire coalescing with them in a feeble attempt to appease Jungkook's necromancy.

Taehyung staggers on his feet and Jungkook can tell that the dragonborn is more affected by the roar than Jungkook is. "F—Fuck," Taehyung groans. He lowers onto his knees and hunches over himself, forehead to the ground. His fingers grip onto his shirt. His eyes are wild, heavy pants tumbling out of his mouth. "Fucking shit."

Jungkook drops next to Taehyung and cards a hand through his hair, his other one trying to unfasten the fingers gripping into the shirt. "Tae, what's—"

The pain is abrupt, the worst it has ever been. However, unlike the previous times where Jungkook had been the vessel of the dragon's roar and agony, this time *Taehyung* is, and the place in Jungkook's chest where a breath pouch would if he had been a dragonborn aches in an echo of the pain that sunders through Taehyung.

Taehyung looks scared. He *is* scared. Jungkook can feel it. Taehyung makes a heaving sound but all he does is cough up some drops of blood.

"We need to close the door. Right now."

"No."

"Taehyung, the dragon soul is trying to reach me through you. They're hurting you because our arcanes are still—"

"S'the plague."

"What?"

"The dragon soul. S'dying from the plague," Taehyung rasps, drops of sweat beading on his forehead and nape. "I—I can feel it. The pain. It's fa—" A grunt trailed by an aborted whine gets stuck in his throat. "Fuck. Y—You heard that?"

"Hear what? Taehyung?"

Taehyung doesn't respond to Jungkook.

Jungkook wrestles against his own arcane as he tries to withdraw it, however it has developed a will of its own. It continues to flow out of him, the flames writhing in the air. They seem purposeless at first, but Jungkook catches onto the way they coil more and more around Taehyung in a blustering cloak. One of them flickers at the corner of Taehyung's parted mouth, disappearing inside.

"I—I think I can hear it talk. I'm hearing a voice? But it's… S'just roars but I can tell it's trying to talk to me."

"The dragon soul?"

"It seems so far away, even if I can hear it."

"We'll figure it out but not like this. We don't know what it may do to you aside from the fact that it's *hurting* you," Jungkook says, the ache in his chest a distant, dull pain. "Kaiya, please. I can't stop my arcane."

A gust of whispers answers him.

" *Sleep.* "

" *Trust.* "

A drop falls on the tip of Jungkook's nose. One more does on his cheek, a third on Taehyung's nape. Soon, a scarlet drizzle then a deluge befalls onto the two of them.

Jungkook does not get to speak a word, his body too heavy and his mouth muddled. He sways on his side and falls onto the ground as Taehyung does too. Jungkook falls asleep to a touch on his cheek, like water caressing his skin.

"...lease. Viper. Jungkook."

Jungkook springs up. His gaze darts around until it sets on Taehyung. "Taehyung." He grips onto Taehyung, the latter crouched next to him and looking more ashen than before. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just have a killer migraine. You weren't waking up at all. Are you alright?"

Jungkook nods. "The roar wasn't impacting me as much as it used to. It was finding a vessel through you. My head hurts too…" He sighs in relief when Taehyung cups Jungkook's face to massage his throbbing temples.

"I'm pretty sure it was the rain. We fell asleep, like during the Night Terrors, but minus the horrifying nightmares."

"I asked for Kaiya's help. I think it gave us the time to 'digest' our gift and close the door. I can't feel you anymore. Not as much as before, at least, and my arcane has withdrawn."

"Although I can still distantly feel your arcane?" Taehyung adds. "It's hard to explain."

"It's as though your arcane left a trace on mine."

"Yeah, that."

"It…" Jungkook pauses for a second. "It feels nice, like my necromancy has a companion now."

"It does." Taehyung doesn't smile, per se, but his face softens. "We should go back to the hut and talk about this with everyone before anything else happens," he carries on and helps Jungkook to his feet.

The trip back to Cahira and Donovan's house is quiet for the most part, neither of them speaking a word as they tiredly lean against each other.

The second they step a foot inside the hut, Dahee, Jimin and Namjoon make a beeline toward them.

"Why the fuck are you both drenched in blood again?" Jimin blurts out.

"A lot happened, but we're fine." Taehyung releases his hold around Jungkook's. "Where's Minsoo? I need to talk to him."

"Locked in there," Hoseok says and thrusts a thumb in one of the rooms at the back of the living room.

Taehyung marches toward the room and steps inside without knocking, closing the door behind him.

Dahee turns toward Jungkook. Jungkook winces at the hard look she pins him with. "What has happened?"

Jungkook showers before explaining anything. He sits on the couch and he doesn't mean to fall asleep as soon as his head touches a pillow, but he passes out nonetheless. When he comes back to

himself, it's to a sleepy looking Taehyung stepping out of his grandfather's room, his hair a bird's nest on his head.

Taehyung curses. "Didn't mean to fall asleep."

Jungkook raises on an elbow from where he's sprawled on the couch. He rubs at his eyes that he opens again when he feels the couch dip next to him.

"You're okay?" Taehyung wonders, sitting next to Jungkook, an arm propped on the sofa's headrest. He looks a lot more rested, his skin having taken back its honeyed color.

Jungkook mumbles an intelligible answer then plops back down. There's no hesitation when he curls on himself and rests his head on Taehyung's lap, tugging the blanket high up to his chin. His greed is welcomed by Taehyung's, by the hand that combs his hair and faintly scratches at his scalp. Jungkook shivers and hums, his limbs and mind still softened by his unexpected slumber.

"…swear to the Elders."

"Right? It was so delicious."

"My beloved is an incredible cook, and so am I," Cahira says.

Taehyung's hand stills in Jungkook's hair.

Jungkook peels an eye open to peer up at him. He can't sense Taehyung's feelings anymore, however the empathy he has always nurtured for the dragonborn is still present, heightened, even, and so he catches onto the tension that wraps around Taehyung's form. "Discomfort?"

"A bit," Taehyung quietly confesses. "Forgot there's people around." He glances down at Jungkook. His nails slowly resume their scratching. Their motions are tentative yet feel oddly bold when the thumb curves a path to the front of Jungkook's ear to halt behind the lobe. "Everything's alright."

Jungkook doesn't answer. He knows the words aren't addressed to himself.

"…awake?"

"They are. The lovebirds are being lovebirds."

Taehyung retracts his hand as he averts his gaze. When Jungkook' stomach grumbles, Taehyung stands. "Come on. We should eat something."

Jungkook nods. He sits up and takes the blanket with him as he and Taehyung make trudge to the dining area where everyone is already installed. Jungkook notices that it is a lot brighter outside, and he supposes that he has slept long enough for Kaiya's late 'morning' to begin.

Jungkook blearily halts next to one of the two vacant chairs and waits.

"I'm fucking starving," Taehyung grumbles and pulls the chair for Jungkook.

Jungkook settles down. When he catches Dahee's knowing smile, Jungkook hides his own.

Taehyung serves Jungkook first, and only then does he make his own plate and begin to eat.

Jimin has the decency to wait for Jungkook and Taehyung to finish their meal before saying “So, what the fuck happened last night?”

Chapter End Notes

It's been a little agaiiiiin, I wasn't at home and I was enjoying my time at my gf's house so excuse the delay for this chapter T____T I really wanted to update on time but it just didn't happen 😞 Initally it was supposed to be one chapter, but it got a tad too humongous a g a i n so I had decided to cut it 🥸 I already have around 11k of CH28 written, and I "only" have 30 pages left of the draft for CH28 to write (although I might extend it and make it longer!!), so next chapter will be posted soon!! When I have good writing sessions, I can usually clear 8-10 pages per day and we're only wednesday sooooo with some luck I'll get to finish CH28 for this sunday but no promises hehe

Thank you so so much for the response to CH26 :((It was so reassuring to read the comments and see that you've enjoyed it no matter how different it was T_____T It was a huge challenge to write and convey all I wanted to convey so thank you 🤱🤍 I continued catching up on comments while I was away and I'll continue to do so hehe

Chapter 28: Kaiya's Gifts

Chapter Summary

Balance is hard to obtain, even harder to maintain. One after another, Taehyung, Jungkook and the rest of the group obtain their gifts, while more questions are unearthed.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has quite a few "cinematic" scenes so to speak I wish I could draw and draw them aaaall 😭 I still doodled some glimpses of it that you'll find at the endnotes

Little songs recs:

1) From beginning to "I will nap until then." : 1 Hour of Magic Fantasy Music - Beautiful, Magical, Relaxing

2) Then this up until "The veil expands before withdrawing on itself." : Music from The Dark Ages - Bloodline (Full Album)

3) Then from "It's as though every remnant of life and..." to "It's painless as..." on loop: Interstellar Main Theme - Extra Extended - Soundtrack by Hans Zimmer

4) Then next scene, start with this: Music for the Anti Hero - Dancing With Flames

5) Then this looped up until "Everything stills." Lacrimosa slowed

6) Theeen the interstellar them song up until the others join taekook again, and then you can put whatver else you want sksksk

Cw:

1) blood, looooooooots of it
2) some bits of gruesomeness but nothing too too graphic, just the usual SLB stuff
3) brief mentions of corpses and bones

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Settled on Jungkook's left, Taehyung reclines against the backrest of his chair. "Long story short: we ate the pomegranate, it impacted our arcanes, Kaiya had to intervene, hence the blood on us

when we arrived."

A chorus of *'what'* answers him.

"We—" Jungkook glances at Taehyung. He doesn't need to ask. Taehyung understands the mute request for permission that he gives with a nod of his head. "A lot happened, but most of it is personal and similar to what you had told us," he says to Cahira and Donovan. "However, something we can share is that Kaiya's gift had quite a singular impact on Taehyung and I's arcanes."

Cahira, poised atop Donovan's shoulder, tilts her head toward Jungkook. "Impact? How so?"

"Our arcanes were a bit… A bit obsessed with each other? And…" Jungkook trails off. He peers at Taehyung again, unsure on how to explain.

"His necromancy and my breaths kinda fused together. Both took a dark purple color, and our arcanes behaved like singular entities together. They were completely out of our control. It felt as though they 'spoke' to and understood each other. I could feel his necromancy as if it was mine, and he could feel some of my breaths as if they were his."

"That is unique," Donovan hums, stroking a spot between Cahira's horns with a finger. "What do you think, Beloved?"

"Did you two have sex?" Is Cahira's blunt question.

Minsoo spits out his drink then slams his fist on the table. Hoseok inhales his water that is expelled through his nostrils seconds later while Jimin implodes into hyena-like cackles that Dahee echoes with a guffaw.

Jungkook springs up. "No!"

"Valid question though," Namjoon provides, earning himself a glare from Taehyung. "Kinda felt like they had a walk of shame when they came back."

"A bloody one," Seokjin jests and breaks into laughter.

"Oh my God." Jungkook sits back down and crosses his arms on the table where he hides his flaming face. "Taehyung. Say something."

"We didn't have sex."

"You're sure?" Cahira presses. "It happens quite a lot after or during the consumption of Kaiya's wedding gift. It can be a carnal affair. There is no shame in that."

"Do you think I wouldn't know if I had had sex with my own husband?" Taehyung says and while it elicits another fit of laughter around the table, Jungkook notices the flaring temper in the terse timber. "A lot happened but none of it was that. What we would like to know, however, is why the pomegranate had an effect on our arcanes when it wasn't supposed to occur. I also don't think that whatever 'door' the gift had opened between Jungkook and I has fully closed. I can still feel traces of his necromancy in me, and vice versa."

The group subdues at Taehyung's evident ire.

Cahira sighs a puff of fire. “The door should be closed, and the gift isn’t supposed to impact the arcane of those who consume it, however keep in mind that arcanes are volatile creatures. They withhold much unknown that will never be explained. It is truer for mated pairs or pairs that are viewed as ‘soulmates’.”

Taehyung’s gaze turns somber. “Jungkook and I aren’t mates, and soulmates are absolute nonsense.”

“Taehyung,” Dahee warns. “Watch your tone.”

“Soulmates have existed for longer than you, your family or your ancestors have, unruly child,” Cahira retorts. “Some can even retain an arcanic bond, like my beloved and I.”

Taehyung crosses his arms over his chest and falls mute. His fingers grip onto his biceps, and Jungkook worries that the nails might bite into the skin and draw blood. Taehyung’s head is lolled forward, strands of hair dangling over his forehead and he looks… gone, all of a sudden. He doesn’t seem present at all, his gaze distant and aloof as the conversation carries on.

Jungkook has seen this same expression on his own face before. It’d happen at random times, or in more specific moments: like when someone would hold his wrist and unknowingly throw his mind back into a haunting memory of the bathroom Seohyung would lock him into.

Unlike the others who are unaware and smile and poke fun at Taehyung, Jungkook’s mood darkens.

Jungkook loops a hand under Taehyung’s arm. He sneaks his fingers beneath the palm but when he can’t move past the tight grip, he curls his other hand over Taehyung’s. He strokes the white knuckles that regain their colors when Taehyung’s clench relents the slightest bit. Jungkook props his head on the tense shoulder, hugging Taehyung’s arm to his chest. “You’re with me,” he whispers. “We’re in Kaiya. You're safe.”

Taehyung nods but doesn’t speak.

"You're with me, your Viper," Jungkook repeats. "We once had a date in a cave where you showed me summersweet butterflies. You even taught me how to carve," Jungkook continues in a whisper and the more he speaks, the more Taehyung seems to be brought back to the present. "One day, we lazed and stayed in bed the whole morning, afternoon and night. We talked about many things, ate on the mattress, read and napped together. It was wonderful. I'd made some pancakes for our night snacks as well."

Taehyung entangles his fingers with Jungkook’s, the tremors in them alleviating little by little. He nods and rapidly blinks, slowly inhaling and exhaling. "They were burnt."

"They were," Jungkook chuckles. "Because you were showing me one of your favorite childhood books, and I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay with you and hear more."

Taehyung's gaze flits on Jungkook's face. "Didn't want you to leave either."

Jungkook squeezes Taehyung's hand. "I know. I—"

“A bridge was formed between the two of them during the consumption of your gift,” Donovan carries on, cutting off Jungkook, “and it appears that it has extended for their arcanes.”

“Is the bridge temporary?” Yoongi inquires.

“Who knows." Cahira peers at Taehyung and Jungkook. “You two seem to be some kind of uncanny case, so anything that we’ve known so far clearly doesn’t apply to you.”

“Why?”

Cahira snorts fire. “Do I look like the Oracle? Plus uncanny cases have always existed, it's nothing unusual.”

“Have you ever heard of one like this before?” Yumi asks.

“Yes, but in ancient stories told when spring would still blossom in Kaiya,” Cahira says. “I don’t recall much of the world before I became Kaiya’s guardian. Neither does Donovan.”

“How long have you been its guardian?”

“Since the very first day of its downfall, so centuries ago. Donovan has been with me the whole time.” Cahira sets a fond look on Donovan.

“Do you consider each other as soulmates?” Dahee inquires with a smile.

“Yes,” Cahira answers, her chin held high. “My arcane had recognized Donovan as my mate since the very first day.”

“Soulmates are childish tales recounted to and by lonely fools,” Taehyung snips. “There’s nothing as such that exists in this world, especially not the arcanic kind.”

“The hell is wrong with you?” Hoseok frowns.

“People are allowed to believe in any kind of faith they wish to believe in, Taehyung,” Dahee says, her voice sharp.

“Especially us, dragonborns,” Jimin adds. “The idea of soulmates isn’t new or foreign to us.”

Jungkook doesn’t need any door to be opened to be aware of Taehyung’s upset.

It’s a testimony of Jungkook’s loyalty for Taehyung that his growing anger is aimed at those cornering and reprimanding his husband like a misbehaving child. Jungkook can’t tell if it’s because only he understands Taehyung this well, or if the others are simply blind to the source of Taehyung’s revulsion to the concept of soulmates.

“I think it’s nice if some believe in soulmates. I find it quite beautiful, actually,” Namjoon continues.

Jungkook doesn’t like the way Taehyung withdraws on himself even more.

“Yeah." Taehyung's throat clicks when he swallows. "Sorry."

“Apologies for my son’s behavior. He does not mean any harm, in spite of how harsh his words may be.”

“He’s just an absolute buffoon when it comes to romantic love,” Jimin says. “He has no clue of how it can be.”

Hoseok snorts. “Buffoon is putting it lightly.”

“You’re worse than him.”

“Hey!”

Jungkook’s teeth grit.

“He can sometimes be quite narrow-minded,” Dahee agrees.

Jungkook can’t refrain himself from emitting a chuckle that is more of a derisive scoff. “Narrow-minded?”

Dahee peers at him. “Yes. You, yourself, have been a recipient of it.”

“I’ve been the recipient of a scorn that *was* unjustified, however understandable once I got to know where it stems from,” Jungkook retorts, harsher than intended. “The only buffoons in this room are you and everyone else at the moment.”

Yoongi raises a brow. "Jungkook?"

“Fucking hell, Viper.” Taehyung straightens up. “It’s fine. I shouldn’t have said th—”

“It’s not fine,” Jungkook interjects, his glower drifting on Taehyung. “They’re all cornering you and—”

“We’re not cornering him. We’re just saying he can be an ass when it comes to romance,” Jimin says with levity.

“And I wonder why, right?” Jungkook smiles but he knows that it does not reach his eyes. “Might be because for years the only man to have ever been in love with Taehyung had been the same one that had torn his wings apart and tortured his mind for fucking *months.* Of course Taehyung hates the idea of soulmates when it must remind him of the vile absurdities Dohyun must have spewed at him. It does not take a genius to figure that out, but I suppose even the obvious can become a riddle to simpletons.”

A bucket of ice cold water may as well have been thrown onto the room’s occupants.

“Oh I—” Jimin’s gaze darts between Jungkook and Taehyung, his expression contrite and pinched into a guilty frown. “I'm sorry. We were just teasing. I didn’t think of that.”

Jungkook holds back a scoff. “You don’t say.”

"Viper."

"There was no need to address us as 'simpletons', Dear," Dahee states but she sounds amused for some reasons.

"Apologies," Jungkook says with a small bow. "I sometimes forget how painful the truth may be to hear."

Cahira snorts.

“ *Viper,* ” Taehyung warns. Jungkook only — partially — subdues when Taehyung’s hand cups his nape. “Why is your temper trying to put mine to shame, huh?”

“Don’t let them speak of you like this when they’re the ones being ignorant," Jungkook continues, ignoring the quip.

“They’re right though,” Taehyung says. “I shouldn’t have said all of that regardless of anything else.”

Theoretically speaking, Jungkook knows that the others have a point as well, but theory escapes his mind when his husband’s upset is at the core of his ire. “Still. Simpletons.”

“Still nothing. Relax."

"There's nothing to be relaxed about when my husband is upset."

"Does your husband being upset give you the right to speak like this to his family?"

"Yes," Jungkook states without an ounce of hesitation.

Taehyung bursts into laughter, his hand finding its way on Jungkook's thigh. "It does, you're right."

"Am I?"

"Yes, but I was still just a little upset.”

“You didn’t— That was more than being upset, Taehyung. That was a haunting memory resurfacing,” Jungkook retorts. “I know because I’ve experienced the same thing before when someone would grip my wrist. You often tell me that I shouldn’t undermine these kinds of things or my own feelings, and neither should you.”

Dahee promptly apologizes to Taehyung, her shame evident. Hoseok and Jimin do the same as well, but Taehyung does not appear to hear or care about them.

At all.

Taehyung’s gaze is settled on Jungkook where it never strays from regardless of the others speaking to him. There’s an astonishment that overtakes his face, softened by a fondness that is so tangible that Jungkook could poke at it and he nearly does when a tamed gust of wind touches his cheek.

Taehyung pulls Jungkook’s chair closer to his own in one smooth tug, up until their knees bump against each other. He turns in his seat to face Jungkook.

Jungkook doesn’t really know what he expects Taehyung to do afterwards, so he’s taken aback by the way Taehyung’s fingers comb through his hair to cradle the back of his head and bring their faces close.

Taehyung’s greed is lovely, even more when it translates in a nuzzle of his nose on Jungkook’s cheek, the touch trailing down to the angle of Jungkook’s jaw then to the throat that Taehyung unabashedly scent. Jungkook wonders if there’s a sliver of discomfort that subsists within Taehyung, or if it has been discarded for now in favor of feeding their greed.

“Thank you,” Taehyung murmurs to Jungkook, chewed so low, only for him to hear.

"Not for that."

"Yes for that."

"I want to crawl inside your chest," Jungkook quietly blurts out at the same time Taehyung utters an uncivilized, *ridiculous,* yet Ô so alluring "I want to devour you."

Taehyung leans back to survey Jungkook.

They silently stare at each other for a moment before they both dissolve into snickers.

Jungkook presses his forehead against Taehyung's shoulder, bracing himself on Taehyung's leg. "This is dumb."

"Yeah, you are."

Jungkook nibbles on Taehyung's shoulder. " *You* are. The most stupid. But my most stupid," he mumbles to himself but Taehyung must hear him anyway because he huffs. He reclines to peer at Taehyung, tracing with his gaze the moles peppering the skin. "I know it'd be comfortable."

"Crawling in my chest?"

Jungkook hums with a nod. "It'd be warm and safe."

And I'd be with you, Jungkook thinks but does not say.

"Maybe one day we can figure out a way for you to carve my chest open without killing me in the process."

Jungkook shouldn't laugh the way he does at the words, but he can't help it because he catches onto the hint of seriousness in the declaration.

Don't kiss him.

"You're insane, Taehyung."

"Thank God, uh?"

Jungkook pecks Taehyung's cheek. "Yes. Thank the Elders."

Taehyung snorts. His gaze flits behind Jungkook. His smile falters then entirely dissipates. As quickly as it had formed, their bubble bursts open.

Taehyung settles properly in his chair but he doesn't take away his hand that he keeps in Jungkook’s hair, scratching motions there that Jungkook melts under, his eyelids fluttering. Taehyung peers at Cahira and carries on with the conversation. “Do you have any books or traces mentioning those uncanny cases you’ve spoken of?”

“Maybe? Donovan and I can look, but it might take a while."

“What about the rain?”

“We didn’t go through another Night Terror.”

“The bell is what starts the Night Terror, not the bloody rain. The rain simply puts you to sleep before you go through a Night Terror,” Cahira clarifies.

“Jungkook and I also heard the dragon roar,” Taehyung announces without warning.

“Shit,” Yoongi curses. “Wait. Jungkook *and* you?”

“I’m fairly certain that Taehyung temporarily became a vessel for this dragon soul,” Jungkook explains. “So far, it has expressed its roars through me, but since there was a bridge between Taehyung and I’s arcane, I suppose that the dragon soul used Taehyung as a device somehow. Taehyung said he could nearly hear them talk.”

“Kind of. It wasn’t words, per se, but…" Taehyung shrugs. "It felt as though I could understand them. I could feel their pain like it was my own.”

“And you believe it’s dying from the plague?” Dahee asks.

“I’m positive,” Taehyung assures. “I know it’s the plague. Felt like it was eating me from the inside and attacking my breath pouch.”

“What is this dragon roar you’re speaking of?” Donovan asks.

Jungkook explains all that he has learned about the dragon roar, aided by Dahee and Miseon who then delve into a detailed explanation of the countenance of the plague and what they have unearthed so far.

Cahira hums to herself, now installed in Donovan’s palm.

Jungkook rests a hand on Taehyung’s knee, happy when he doesn't catch any sign of discomfort in Taehyung. "This soul has been trying to reach me.”

“What about before you arrived in Vanae?” Cahira questions.

“I never saw or heard any dragonborn soul before that. Amaris is…” Jungkook pauses. “I believe it’s completely devoid of any dragonborn souls, that the Great War has completely expunged them, regardless of whether or not they have found peace.”

“Your necromancy may have also simply been unreceptive to dragonborns before coming to Vanae,” Yumi pipes up, sitting crossed legs on her chair at the end of the dining table. “Humans are mundane and lack arcane compared to dragonborns. I assume that extends to their souls in a way. Vanae’s land is potent with arcane, and being surrounded by dragonborns may have opened up your necromancy to their cries.”

“I hate to say it, but she has a point,” Yoongi agrees and Jungkook nods.

“Well,” Cahira begins, “if the bridge between the two of you can help communicate with this specific dragon soul you speak of, you should eat another gift from Kaiya.”

“Have you gone mad?” Dahee frowns. “Jungkook has just told us the soul had been hurting my son. It could also have consequences on Jungkook himself.”

“And said son could perhaps help solve the plague, along with Jungkook's aid,” Cahira counters.

“Why do you think this?” Jungkook wonders.

“The second to last guardian died from the plague, which is abnormal, to say the least. We have always been protected from any kind of death or illness, arcanic or not. Whatever the plague is, it is powerful,” Cahira says, confirming what Jungkook had already assumed. “The plague kills within a few days once someone has been hit by it, yet you say you’ve been hearing this dragon’s roar for nearly three months. It doesn’t make any sense, unless there is something unique about this specific dragon soul.”

“Unique? Like what?”

“How would I know?” Cahira grunts. “Could be anything.”

“Could it be related to the primordial stone?” Junhyun questions.

“Primordial stone?” Donovan and Cahira speak at the same time.

Dahee nods. “Do you perhaps know what it is?”

“We have heard of the word primordial, in ancient, lost archives,” Donovan says, “however it was never about a stone.”

“What was it about then?”

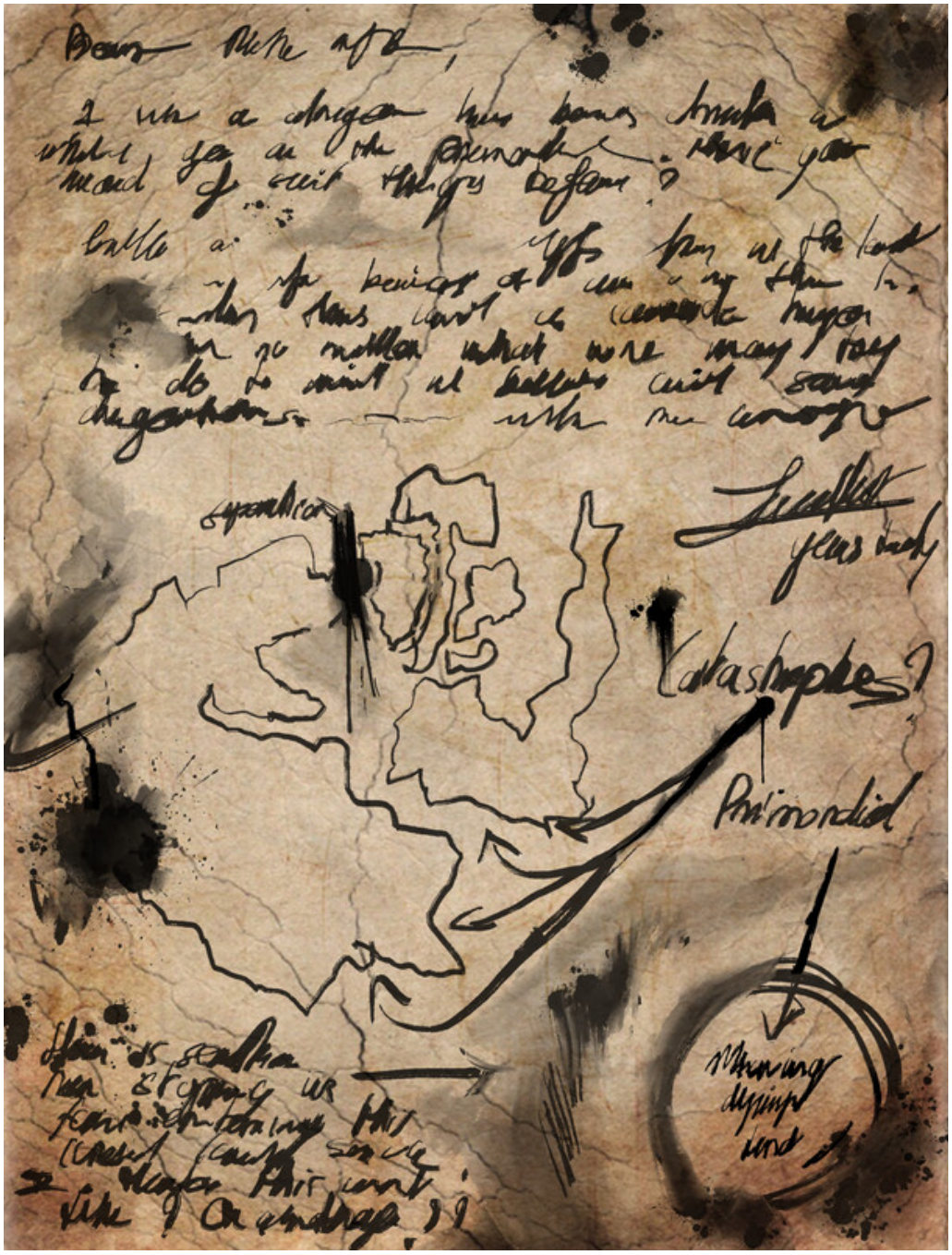
“A land.”

“A land?” Everyone echoes.

“The oldest speculation I remember was that this ‘primordial land’ had been referred to as the heart of death, a tale I had read in a letter decades ago. It is no confirmed knowledge, however it may aid you in your searches.” Donovan rises to his feet and walks toward the library-like area. He climbs the stairs and after rummaging through the shelves for a few minutes, he comes back down with some kind of letter. “I recall finding this in one of the numerous ruins littering Kaiya’s forest.”

Jungkook takes the envelope Donovan hands to him. He takes out the two pages of the flimsy letter that he carefully unfolds.

One is a full page sentence, while the other one has some writing along with the sketch of a map.



Jungkook tries to read some of its content. “This is in draconian, no?” He peers at Dahee for confirmation.

Dahee smiles at him with so much pride that Jungkook's cheeks warm up. "It is indeed, Dear. However it is quite…"

“Indecipherable, yes,” Cahira finishes. “Aside from a couple words. This letter has been eroded by time.”

“I can read the word ‘primordial’ that seems to be pointing at the circle where ‘heart of death’ is written.” Dahee takes the two pages and flattens them on the table. “And you assume that this circle is an indicator of a land?”

“I believe so, yes,” Donovan answers. “I could decipher a few more words on the second page. They describe this primordial land as a heart of death, however I have never found out why it has been called such, nor if it is an actual land.”

“Could this land be related to necromancy?”

“Maybe,” Taehyung hums.

“Can a land, like, shrink into a stone? Or maybe the stone created the land? This is fucking confusing,” Jimin mumbles. “If the stone has necromancy in it, it'd make even more sense that Seohyung wants it considering that she may want to expunge dragonborns.”

“Why would the primordial stone be linked to the plague if it isn’t an enhancer or anything like that, but instead some kind of deadly land?”

“The plague kills. Necromancy can as well,” Hoseok says.

“Perhaps yes. Let's say that the primordial stone and the primordial land are one single thing, why has it been considered a stone all this time if it’s a land? And why is it described as a heart of death?”

“Much knowledge can be lost in translation,” Donovan says.

"It is old draconian," Elder Miseon adds. "Even I cannot decipher more than what Donovan has found out. However a couple of our oldest Elders may be able to unearth more from this letter, and any other ancient document you have that may aid with the plague or primordial stone."

Jungkook sighs. He peers at Yumi. “Have Seohyung and Dohyun told you anything we don’t know regarding the primordial stone?”

Yumi hums as she rocks back and forth. “Dohyun was told about the stone by Seungwon who was told about it by Seohyung. The stone can kill dragonborns and it is said to reside in dragonborn lands. That’s all I got to know from Dohyun and Seungwon.”

Jungkook’s attention narrows on the phrasing. “And what have you gotten to know from someone else?”

Yumi chuckles. “Nothing in particular, keen prince."

Jungkook doubts that but doesn’t push on the subject. “If the primordial is a land, how could it kill dragonborns? Even more if it’s supposedly a dragonborn land.”

“It may be a vestige of the Great War,” Cahira hums. “Hell knows humans and warlocks have left poisoned gifts on their path. Kaiya is a prime example of it. The primordial land could be one as well.”

Taehyung heaves a grunt. “If the plague can be coupled with the primordial stone or land or whatever the fuck it is, this could lead to an unprecedented extermination of dragonborns. We need to find it first, or at least figure out what it is.”

"Can't the Oracle help?" Woobin suggests.

"The Oracle never meddles with such matters, aside from uttering cryptic messages. Any further intervention from them would disturb the world's balance and could have grave consequences," Donovan interjects. "The power of foresight and vast knowledge cannot be carelessly used, as it can easily be misinterpreted."

“Maybe the primordial *is* a land rather than a stone, but what if the ‘heart of death’ in that letter is the stone?” Jungkook ponders.

"It may be. I'm not sure of anything right now," Taehyung mutters.

"Perhaps sailing to this land could lead to some answers."

“May we keep this letter?” Dahee requests and at Donovan’s approval, she folds back the papers and tucks the envelope in her blouse.

“I wish we had a way to know how Seohyung found out about the stone, and how she’s so certain it is one,” Jungkook says.

“It’s never too late to pay her a visit again,” Taehyung proposes with the hint of a smile.

Jungkook snickers to himself. “To break a bone again?”

“Maybe the spine this time to see the vow we took in the cave come to fruition,” Taehyung jests but Jungkook catches the offer in it.

Jungkook smiles and squeezes Taehyung’s knee. “We will visit her, yes.”

“I could join as well,” Yumi exclaims. “My lizard can sing very… Ah, persuasive lullabies. Seohyung would have no other choice than to speak.”

“Isn’t your lizard such a convenient and powerful familiar,” Yoongi says with a barely contained sneer.

“It is, isn’t it? My most precious one,” Yumi enthusiastically nods.

“We can see after Kaiya’s visit,” Jungkook concludes. “I’m curious about the part that mentions catastrophes above the word 'primordial'."

“The continent drawn here is what was once Vanae, Amaris, and neighboring nations. The lands used to be a lot larger before natural catastrophes entirely destroyed parts of them or fragmented them into islands,” Donovan explains. "I suppose the letter speaks about this as well, but I haven't been able to decipher it."

“Oh is this why the islands south of Vanae have a bunch of crevasses and canyons?” Hoseok wonders.

“Yes, Dear,” Junhyun says, then surveys Cahira. “What do you know about those catastrophes?”

“They were happening millennia ago. I vaguely remember hearing bards’ tales about them,” Cahira answers. “They all stopped after the Great War. No one ever got to know why. Even back then.”

“Even you don’t know more than us about this. It’s quite odd,” Dahee hums to herself.

“History has always been riddled with mysteries nurtured by time and lack of physical traces. It has worsened after the Great War that has expunged countless archives and historical books, relics and many more.”

“We should focus on the plague first rather than asking ourselves hundreds of questions with no answers,” Taehyung begins. “If we can talk to the dragon soul Jungkook has been hearing, we may find some actual pointers on what to do about the plague.”

“This is easier said than done,” Jungkook says.

“If we’re granted another pomegranate, then—”

“You will be wounded by the soul again. What if the plague gets to you through them?”

“But I could potentially communicate with them.”

“*And*?” Jungkook’s gaze sets on Taehyung. “What if it kills you in the process?”

“It wouldn’t.”

“You don’t know that.” Jungkook takes the necklace Jimin hands to him, Revna’s voice echoing in his mind.

“Kookie, don’t fight with Taetae again.”

“Neither do you,” Taehyung retorts. “We’ll have to take some risks at some point.”

“We’ve been taking risks since day one, so if anything, we *can’t* afford to take any risks.”

“He says after eating a fucking fruit made from our blood given by an arcanic forest that was also drowned in blood.”

Jungkook’s mouth opens then closes around naught. He smacks Taehyung’s arm when the dragonborn snorts to himself. “Nevertheless, you aren’t putting your life on the line for a ‘maybe’.”

“Taehyung *could* be used as a vessel for the soul,” Cahira intervenes.

“No.” Jungkook’s voice is icy, sharp with an edge that a few people at the table recline at. “I’m not risking his life.”

Cahira’s green tail snaps from side to side. “What if it could save others?”

“It wouldn’t change a thing.”

“It would for most.”

“It does not—”

A green cloud puffs in Donovan’s palm, effectively cutting Jungkook off. When it dissipates, the tiny dragon is gone.

In its stead, a woman stands, or rather sits, settled on Donovan’s lap.

Her skin is of the same color of her dragon self: with green and azure shadows, and pink accents toward the eyes in a makeshift makeup. Two red horns peek from the mass of white curly hair that are messily drawn into a loose, thick braid, some shorter strands framing her face. “Tell me, Devourer of Death,” Cahira starts, her vibrant, calculating gaze even more intimidating when the two light blue eyes bore onto Jungkook. “Would you choose to save his life over your people’s?”

Jungkook thinks about lying, but he can tell it’d be fruitless. “Yes.”

“What about you, Corrupted One?” The silver diadem settled on Cahira’s head does not budge when she tilts her head toward Taehyung. “What if Jungkook can solve the plague, but would have to offer his life as a prize? Would you let it happen?”

Jungkook doesn’t expect Taehyung to answer with anything other than ‘Yes’. After all, Taehyung loves his people, and Jungkook does too, but Jungkook has a different view on life and death. He’s a necromancer, and worst of all, he nurses feelings for Taehyung that the latter isn't even aware of. It’s not as though Taehyung is also fall—

“No.”

Jungkook stills. His head darts in Taehyung’s direction.

Not a sliver of doubt coats Taehyung’s voice. He looks absolute, his hard gaze pinned on Cahira. “I’d find another way.”

“And if there is no other way?”

“Then I’d wear the title you’ve given me,” Taehyung answers Cahira. “Is that a good enough answer for you?”

“Selfishness is a flaw,” Cahira says.

“One you certainly hav—” Donovan coughs when Cahira elbows him in the stomach.

“I don’t think it’s selfish of us to want the other to remain alive, no matter the cost,” Jungkook retorts.

Cahira pulls her long braid over her shoulder, playing with the red bow attached at the end as she leans back against Donovan. She still looks small compared to the man’s wide stature. “This last bit *is* selfish. Debased.”

Jungkook dismissively shrugs.

Cahira snorts. She unfastens the bow, slowly undoing her braid and combing her hands through the strands with the tip of her fingers that are adorned by long and acute dark nails. She peers at Donovan, having to tilt her head backward to do so. “I like him.”

“I would like to say I’m surprised, however I do see some of you in him. You’ve once uttered similar words,” Donovan says, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

Jungkook quirks a brow. “You have?”

“We seem to have a lot more in common than I had first assumed, Devourer of Death.”

“How so?”

“The only reason why my beloved is still alive is because of my own selfishness. However, said selfishness had a price, as it always does, mainly me being forced to be Kaiya’s guardian in return.”

“Forced?” Jungkook and Taehyung echo.

“A story for another time.” Cahira drinks from Donovan’s cup. “I’ve been pondering on how you could help Kaiya. You may receive another gift if you aid the forest’s spirits, and you could then perhaps figure out what to do with this dragon’s roar you’ve been hearing.”

“Does Kaiya kill visitors?” Yumi asks.

“Sometimes. To protect itself if it deems it necessary. Most who come to Kaiya are here to plunder, rampage and tear apart. They do not respect what had once been a place of exchange and love,” Cahira says and there’s a longing in her voice that is echoed by her distant gaze. “Kaiya only wishes to find its peace and harmony anew, to become spring and let go of winter.”

“Interesting,” Yumi sing-songs. Her eyes set on Cahira. “What’s your arcane?”

“None of your concern,” Cahira discards with a wave of her hand.

“You and Donovan have been here for centuries,” Yumi continues, visibly ignoring the warning in Cahira’s gaze. “Is your beloved capable of manipulating arcane somehow? He seems human, but he’s clearly more than that, yet he’s not a warlock or a dragonborn.”

Wind rustles outside.

Jungkook hears whispers, their sounds angry and upset.

“Do not speak of my beloved,” Cahira snarls.

“Careful, Beloved,” Donovan says when Cahira rises to her feet.

“Sure! Can we speak about you instead?” Yumi carries on, unfazed.

“Can someone tell this basket case to shut up,” Woobin mumbles from afar, tucked in his chair and eyeing Yumi as though a second head has grown on her shoulder.

Yumi stands too, the lizard on her head staring at Cahira who walks up to Yumi. “The plague can kill Kaiya’s guardians, it seems, so to which extent does your immortality go? What are its limits? Would your arcane be gone once dead? Oh! Can you leave Kaiya, if someone were to transport you outside?”

“Yumi. Stop it,” Jungkook snips, and he’s reminded of what Yumi had told him. Would she be able to make Cahira her familiar?

“I simply want to know."

Cahira halts in front of Yumi, her head held high. Any trace of amiability is gone from her face, and Jungkook understands why Cahira may see some of herself in him. There’s a certain poise that swathes her, coalesced with this controlled yet merciless yearn to protect, a mirror to what Jungkook has experienced in the past for Taehyung.

So Jungkook isn't all too surprised when Cahira's hand suddenly lurches forward and holds a tight grip of Yumi's face, her nails digging into the side of Yumi's head.

The lizard begins to sing.

Groans erupt from the dragonborns at the table.

Cahira snatches the reptile by the throat with her free hand. She squeezes, but the singing continues. She clicks her tongue. The gems adorning her crown shine as she begins to murmur in a language that Jungkook recognizes as draconian.

Yumi becomes limp in her hold.

The song stops.

Yumi's mouth is slacked open, a drop of drool trickling at the corner of her mouth. She collapses with a dull thud when Cahira lets her fall to the ground.

"You appear to have some kind of consciousness," Cahira rasps to the lizard, her tail snapping behind her. "Shut your mouth or you will be put to sleep as well."

The lizard wiggles in Cahira's hold and breaks itself free. Instead of padding toward Yumi, it runs to a corner of the room and curls into a ball there.

Cahira spits what sounds like an insult before walking back to her mate. She plops down on the chair Donovan occupies, settled between his legs. "Cocky warlock."

"Indeed, beloved. How long?"

"Ah." Cahira groans. "Only a few minutes. Annoying." She picks Donovan's cup again and drinks from it. She heaves a deep sigh. "I forgot what I was saying," she mumbles and visibly softens when Donovan easily cradles her navel with one hand.

"We were discussing whether or not Jungkook may be of aid to Kaiya," Donovan smiles.

"Right." Cahira nods. "Well. What do you think, Devourer of Death?"

"I'd love to visit this maze you've spoken of, where the pit I saw in the vision is," Jungkook replies.

"We may arrange something in a few minutes. We will first have to see if Kaiya will allow us to enter the maze to begin with."

"My," Yumi sighs. "Unexpected."

Cahira and Jungkook's heads swivel toward Yumi who's laid on the floor and wiping her mouth.

"Why is she already awake," Cahira grumbles.

"Thank you for giving me a taste of your arcane," Yumi says with a smile that she aims at Cahira. "It is quite… exquisite."

"Do not push, Rot-bearer," Cahira rumbles.

Yumi's smile disappears, replaced by surprise. She breaks into a laugh a while later that grows to a cackle. "Oh aren't you special, Guardian. Aaah… I'm even more interested now."

Cahira shudders and curses in draconian. "Keep your distance or I will have you be cast out of Kaiya."

Yumi lifts a thumb and remains where she's laid on the floor, humming to herself.

"What will Jungkook gain in exchange for his help?" Taehyung asks with a certain aloofness that Cahira scoffs at.

"Let us see first *if* he can aid Kaiya, Corrupted One." Cahira's gaze drifts across the group. She frowns then peers at Donovan. "Have you assessed some of their arcanes while I was asleep?"

"Not yet," Donovan shakes his head. "However, the flowers must have blossomed by now."

"Assess?"

"Along with the Night Terrors, Kaiya sometimes requests this additional method to learn more about its visitors and offer them a fitting gift," Donovan explains.

"Donovan is not a warlock, however he is deeply attuned to the Arcane," Cahira says. "He will be able to determine the potency of your arcane."

"I wasn't aware it was something someone could do," Namjoon says.

"It's mandatory for certain dragonborns when they manifest their breaths as hatchlings for the first time," Taehyung says. "It's never an exact science at all. It's more about deductions and estimations. In my case, the potency of my arcane is part of why I'm considered a chaos dragon and why Areum isn't."

"How so?"

"Chaos dragons have between five to seven breaths, seven being the most breaths any dragon can have. At least known to history."

Jungkook hums, unable to look away from Taehyung. "What criteria make a chaos dragon?"

"The dragonborn has to check several boxes to be deemed as a chaos one. First they need to have at least five breaths, then within those five or plus breaths, more than two need to be destructive. Lastly, something more subjective but equally important is taken into account: their personality. If they're volatile, temperamental, quick to anger and things like these. Chaos dragons are… chaotic, as stupid as it sounds."

Taehyung sounds anything but stupid at the moment and *God.* Jungkook hopes that his fascination for the dragonborn isn't too obvious in the way he stares at him and hangs onto every single word.

"In my case, I check every single box. My arcane's potency is high. I have four destructive breaths: lightning, fire, wind and force. Five if we count hemomancy as a destructive, which I suppose it can be. And my personality also fits the archetype of a chaos dragon, even if it has gotten somewhat better the older I've grown, but it'll still be there to some extent."

Taehyung is a dragonborn who could raze everything in his path so effortlessly, yet he is also one that would be hunched over himself to carve miniature baby creatures at night. One that excitedly chats for hours about the kids he teaches the ropes of hunting to. It's also the one who cooks every single day for Jungkook, cradles Jungkook in his arms when the latter's slumber is plagued by nightmares, or tenderly bathes Jungkook's hair when the latter is feeling lazy.

Taehyung is such a compelling, endearing dichotomy that Jungkook doesn't know what to do with this sudden burst of affection he feels for the man.

"Overall, chaos dragons are nearly extinct by now," Taehyung sighs. "Dragonborns with more than two breaths are extremely rare and constitute perhaps 3% of the population. Probably less, actually. Within this already narrow pool, dragonborns with more than two breaths *and* two destructive ones are even rarer. Definitely less than 1%."

"Aren't you special," Jimin playfully rolls his eyes and dodges the small fireball Taehyung flicks at him.

"That's why Areum isn't a chaos dragon."

"Yeah. While he has five breaths, the potency of his arcane isn't as high as the one of a chaos dragon, and he only has two destructive breaths: ice and blue fire," Taehyung says. "The Council has objects that can kind of determine someone's potency through different means. The results aren't actual numbers, but they give a good general idea."

"Was there ever any number mentioned?" Jungkook mumbles his question, eager to hear more and gorging onto every word that tumbles from Taehyung's mouth.

"In some books, yeah, but they're so exorbitant that they don't really make any sense. They also don't mean shit because we don't have anything to compare them with."

"Wasn't Taehyung's arcane assessed through Woosung's daughter?" Jimin asks.

"It had been, yes," Dahee nods. "They had first tried to use some of the objects the Council had, but it had never given any conclusive results. Woosung's daughter had then been called forth. She uses some sort of spectrum of colors that only she knows the significance of. All we got to know at the time is that when Taehyung had been around 8 years old, his arcane was already more potent than most adults. She had assessed his arcane a second time when he was 18 years old, however she never shared her interpretation of the results."

"Why not?"

"Woosung said I shouldn't know," Taehyung shrugs.

"There can be a madness that comes with being aware of the power one retains," Donovan says and there's a terseness in his voice that hadn't been there before. He lifts Cahira by her waist to prop her on the vacant chair next to him. "If that is all, I would like to proceed with my assessment."

Hoseok lifts a hand. "Can we start with me?"

"No. My resources are limited," Donovan replies. "Kaiya has requested me to assess Jungkook and Taehyung, however I would personally like to do so for Yumi as well, since I should have a couple flowers left afterwards."

Yumi springs up. “Me?”

“Yes.” Donovan’s gaze is still friendly but veiled with a sharp interest. “I’m curious.”

“Revna too! Revna wants to assess like Kookie.”

“Maybe later, okay?” Jungkook whispers to Revna, the latter in her ruby.

“Revna wants out.”

“In a minute, Lovely.”

Donovan stands. He smiles at Cahira who, to Jungkook’s surprise, smiles back. The tips of Cahira’s ear turn pink when Donovan pats her head with a hand. “I’ll be back promptly,” Donovan announces and walks out of the hut.

“Does he use a spectrum of color as well?”

“Yes and no. You will see,” Cahira answers and sits crossed legs on her chair.

When Donovan comes back a few minutes later, the table is silent, anticipation floating in the room.

Jungkook and Taehyung both straighten up and emit an *‘Oh’* in unison.

Unlike most of Kaiya’s flora, the three flowers Dovona is holding are of vibrant pink, blue and purple hues. The petals appear to be made of glass, catching the light here and there. The flowers float within the glass-like sphere they’re contained in, the latter’s surface blurred with condensation and morning dew that drops on some of the petals. The sphere is held in Donovan’s palm, however not quite touching it.

Donovan halts in the kitchen and faces the group installed at the dining table. When he retracts his hand, the sphere remains afloat in the air. “Yumi,” he begins, “If I may start with you.”

“Of course.” Yumi pushes herself up. She walks up to Donovan and pauses in front of him. “What do I do?”

Donovan gestures toward the sphere. “Reach for one of the flowers, please.”

“Through the glass?” Yumi and Jungkook speak together. She snorts and glances at him.

Jungkook frowns and folds his arms over his chest.

“Yes. Through the glass,” Donovan answers.

Yumi does so without any hesitation. Her fingers pass through the sphere. She grabs one of the glass flowers that she takes out of its confinement to hold it in her hand.

“Infuse your arcane in the flower. I will then be able to have an idea of its potency. It requires a minimum of 45 minutes to reach the final results, as it is a slow process that can stretch to several hours,” Donovan explains.

“Have the results ever happened before those 45 minutes?” Taehyung asks, Jungkook having been wondering the same thing.

“As far as I am aware, it has only happened once.” Donovan’s mouth twists, his nose twitching. “With a cursed daughter. However I wasn’t always present when an assessment would occur, and neither was Cahira. It has most likely happened in the past without our knowledge.”

Jungkook glances at Taehyung and he can tell Taehyung’s thoughts are converging on the same person. It may be a long shot, however he says “Is this cursed daughter perhaps Woosung’s?”

Donovan’s shoulders tense. “Yes.” He folds his hands behind his back. He’s not fast enough, and Jungkook catches the tremble in the limbs.

Jungkook peers at Dahee who glances back at him. “Woosung and his daughter have visited Kaiya?”

“Once. Years ago. They never came back,” Donovan answers, his voice clipped.

“Why did—”

“Yumi. Carry on,” Donovan interjects.

Everyone watches Yumi and the glass flower.

Jungkook waits, curious to see how her necromancy will manifest, if it perhaps has a more tangible aspect like his flames. However all that Yumi does is slash her palm with a dagger and let the blood flow on one of the flower’s petals. The blood isn’t as red as Jungkook would expect it to be. It’s more of a reddish brown. “Yumi, is hemomancy part of your necromancy? Or can you manipulate it at all?”

“Nope.” Yumi pops out the ‘p’.

Even if made out of glass, the flower appears to absorb Yumi’s blood that stains the blue and pink of the petal.

A minute passes.

An additional 30 seconds does that Jungkook counts in his head.

It’s when the fourth minute is nearly over that the flower reacts to Yumi’s blood and arcane.

The colors are drained from the flower, for lack of a better word, as if sucked out of the plant, however not just. The petals wrinkle. They wither on themselves and take a darker green and brown, almost rot-like tint. A petal falls limply in her hand and the flower doesn’t appear to be made of glass anymore but rather of increasingly decaying matter.

Jungkook’s gaze darts between Yumi and Donovan.

Donovan hums. He surveys Cahira then Yumi. “Thank you. You may put the flower back in the bubble.”

“My pleasure,” Yumi grins and does as told, the flower now laying at the bottom of the sphere where it seemingly continues to decompose.

“Taehyung, if you may.”

Taehyung stands and pushes his chair back. He rounds the table to halt where Donovan is and Donovan visibly fights back the urge to step away, his body jerking with an aborted motion. “Do I just grab one?”

“Yes.” Donovan plucks out his handheld fan that he swings open and covers his mouth and nose with.

Taehyung takes a flower that he holds in his right palm. “How do I go about it? I have several breaths.”

Donovan clears his throat. “You can infuse any breath you wish. It does not matter.”

Fire coats the index of Taehyung’s left hand.

Jungkook does not think that anyone else notices, that only he can because he has been a witness of his necromancy and Taehyung’s breaths blend, but he catches the shift in the flames and how they are the slightest bit darker than usual.

The little creature in Jungkook’s mind can’t help but revel in how he has left a trace within Taehyung’s arcane. If the way Taehyung’s eyes have adorned a more golden color is any hint when he turns his head to glance at Jungkook, a similar kind of thought must have traveled through Taehyung’s mind.

“Hurry, please,” Donovan urges.

The flame is small from where it flickers at the tip of Taehyung’s index. He allows it to barely graze one of the glass petals.

“You will need to give it more arca—”

The flower abruptly implodes in Taehyung’s hand.

It sends pieces of flying glass across the room, some of them piercing through a wall, a shelf and, for the most unfortunate like Minsoo, through a shoulder.

“Fuck,” Taehyung curses, holding the remnants of the flower. The rest of it litters the ground in shattered glass.

Donovan’s gaze is wide and for the first time, it properly settles on Taehyung. He takes a wobbly step back, then another and more until he’s leaning against the kitchen counter at the far back of the room. He’s panting and gasping for air as he says “Leave the remaining pieces in the bubble. I… I will pick up the rest later.”

Taehyung drops the shredded glass in the sphere, the colors erased to a dull gray.

“Jungkook. Come forth.”

Jungkook joins Taehyung in front of the sphere. He does not have to worry about stepping into the fragments of broken glass because gusts of wind push them out of his path. He smiles at Taehyung and touches his back. “Thank you.”

“Careful.” Taehyung does not budge from where he stands on Jungkook’s right.

Jungkook passes his hand through the sphere and the feeling is odd, as though dipping his limb past a ribbon of water. Tattoos darken his skin. Flames coat his hand and the little creature rumbles in happiness again because they aren’t as black as before, but rather of a subtle, dark purple.

Taehyung’s tongue darts over his lower lip, his eyes fully golden now. He surveys Jungkook’s throat where tattoos spread in a silky sensation. He looks away moments later, but the hunger in his gaze remains.

“Jungkook, you may do the same as Taehyung,” Donovan instructs.

Jungkook nods. He focuses back on his task rather than on the way Taehyung had looked a second away from consuming more of his necromancy. The ghost of Taehyung’s tongue and lips echo their memory through a shiver on Jungkook's skin.

Jungkook makes a move to grab the flower. He or his flames do not get to touch it. They don't even get the chance to reduce the distance any further. His flower and the remnants of the already used ones become fully black.

They all wither to ashes within a second.

Jungkook is taken aback by the pile of dust in the sphere, however his surprise is nothing compared to the shock that runs through the room.

Yoongi springs to his feet along with Dahee and even Minsoo who has healed the wound on his shoulder.

Donovan looks worse for wear. His respiration is erratic now, a mirror of his wild gaze that darts across the room. He knocks over a plate when he braces himself on the kitchen counter. Blood trickles from his fingers that are gripping onto his hand fan.

“Beloved,” Cahira says when she approaches him. “You need air.”

Donovan shakes his head. “Revolting,” he spits out and talks some more but it is too quiet and rapid for Jungkook to understand.

“It is Kaiya’s decision,” Cahira says. “It must have seen something in him.”

Donovan’s expression is aghast yet his gaze is so evidently terrified.

Jungkook doesn’t know what to make of this. He hasn’t even gotten to touch the glass flower, and his uneasiness grows when he pivots. He surveys the group that peers at him with concern, maybe even with some sliver of fear, all except for Taehyung.

Taehyung looks content from where he peers at the ashes in the glass bubble. There’s something akin to pride on his face, and whatever semblance of discomfort Jungkook had been feeling now vanishes.

“I have never felt anything as such before, Cahira,” Donovan continues. “No flowers were ever destroyed like this. Before he— Before he even touches it. He should not be allowed to—”

“It is not black and white,” Cahira retorts. "He is the first of his kind to–"

Jungkook's teeth grit. "Necromancy shouldn't be allowed to exist?"

It's hesitant, but Donovan's gaze finally meets Jungkook's. "You—" His jaw tightens, his face morphing around repulsion. "You are abnormal."

Jungkook expects himself to be annoyed at this, but all he feels is a numbness drilled by the hundreds of similar remarks he has heard from Seohyung.

Taehyung, on the other hand, doesn't share the apathy.

"The fuck does that even mean?" Taehyung snips and steps forward.

"His arcane is abnormal. It defies life in its nature, even more so in its potency," Donovan says.

Taehyung chuckles and it's scornful and mocking and so *enticing* in the way it's slithered with a somber promise. "Because a fucking flower withered? It doesn't mean anything."

"It means everything *I* need to know," Donovan counters. "The greater the power, the worse the consequences any mistake made will be. It is unstable. It lacks balance."

You do, Donovan does not say, but it is heard.

"Life thrives on balance. It *needs* it."

"I didn't choose to be a necromancer or to be able to raise the dead and temper with life. I never had a choice in anything," Jungkook rasps. "Should I die? Would my death balance my instability then?"

Donovan's gaze darkens. "It is an option."

"Donovan! This is enough," Cahira rumbles.

A staccato erupts on Jungkook's right.

He sees the way everyone is standing. Dahee has a hand on the handle of her sword while Yoongi's ink drips from his fingers, both at the ready. Meanwhile Taehyung is…

Taehyung is *beautiful.*

A pure ire oozes from his arcane that snaps and coils at his fingers in lightning and fire.

"You can certainly try to kill him, if you want to," Taehyung challenges, his gaze fixated on Donovan.

"Careful of how you address my mate," Cahira warns.

"Same mate that is threatening my husband."

Donovan's lip curls around the hint of a snarl. "You are both unstable monstrosities."

"Should I die too, if so?" One of Taehyung's hands grabs Jungkook's arm, tucking himself further in front of Jungkook. "Chaos dragons were always deemed as too powerful, monstrosities destined to be exterminated by humans and warlocks, and in some cases, by their own kind."

Donovan’s gaze drifts on a point above Taehyung and Jungkook. “You are given balance in your grievance.” A flash of surprise washes over Taehyung’s face before it disappears. “However it is still rendered unstable by your chaos heritage that I am now a witness of. Jungkook, however—”

“Will be fine,” Taehyung interrupts.

“The worst I can do is raise the dead, but I pay a price for it. My necromancy has a cost.”

“As it should.” Donovan's respiration is more even now. He surveys Cahira. “They shouldn’t have come here.”

Cahira looks torn, her face pinched. “It is not our choice.”

“What about their gifts?”

“It will be up to fate.”

“You know well that fate is only partial in Kaiya. The necromancer’s gift could be damning for all.”

“My arcane isn’t—” Jungkook’s fingers ball up into fists, the nail boring onto his palms. He blinks away the sting in his eyes and he hates how upset he’s growing at what a stranger is telling him, but it echoes too much with everything Seohyung has told him all his life. “It’s not evil. Being a necromancer doesn't mean that I'm the monster some books recount about us."

“A part of you and your arcane is inherently heinous, and immoral.”

“What is heinous about helping lost souls finding peace?” Dahee snaps, anger slathering each and every word. She walks around the table, Jungkook now framed by her and Taehyung.

“Being able to raise the dead goes against nature. Being able to temper with souls does as well, regardless of one’s intentions,” Donovan carries on. “There is an aspect of his necromancy that is ravenous. I could feel its thirst and it was— It *is* vile."

“Ravenous?” Yumi hums.

“Confidence is a slow and insidious killer that *will* overpower you if you do not temper it. I believe your fight with the Council is a prime example of this.” Donovan glances at the seal on Taehyung’s wrist.

“And you sound just like them,” Taehyung sneers.

“Because they are right. Their fear is warranted. Their wish to contain you is warranted. The Council has made mistakes because they are flawed. They are humans. You, yourself, must not forget this humanity."

Jungkook frowns. "We know w—"

"You are *not* unique, nor above all.” Donovan's spine straightens as he approaches Taehyung and Jungkook. He lowers his hand fan, his arms folding behind him as he meets Jungkook's gaze. "Monstrosities have existed before you. Problems have arisen and will continue to do so that cannot be solved through mindless destruction or death."

"You think that *I* don't know this?" Taehyung retorts with a rasp.

Oddly enough, Donovan subdues at the remark. "You must maintain balance. You must not solely rely on your necromancy, your breaths, and most of all, your devotion for one another, lest you lead the other to his demise."

"We aren't," Taehyung says but he doesn't sound too convinced.

"I have heard many tales about you, of a manor of death, and of a bloody forest."

Jungkook surveys his tattoos. He withdraws them and lowers his head, an odd sense of shame flaring in him.

"Jungkook's necromancy may be unnatural, but isn't that the case for every arcane?" Taehyung states and his words are sharpened with a cold, steady assurance, akin to the one of a leader advocating for a misdeed their people may have done. "Doesn't it go against nature to be able to harness its creations? Doesn't Kaiya *itself* go against nature? Bathed in blood, trapping Elders know how many dozens of thousands of souls in its midst."

"This is not about this."

"It is for me right now."

"You're missing my last point."

"And you're missing my first one. I have no interest in chatting about other irrelevant matters."

Donovan exhales. "You have not listened to anything I have said."

"I have. I've heard you describe Jungkook's necromancy like it's some kind of fucking disease. I've heard you shame him for being born as something that is out of his control. I can't quite care about any points you may have raised when all I can think about is the upset you've induced in my husband."

Jungkook's heart stutters, and all of a sudden he understands what Donovan had meant about him and Taehyung being the willing bane of each other's life.

"You're preaching about nature, balance and all that nonsense," Taehyung chuckles as he takes a step forward. "I was told no human can stay within Kaiya for long, let alone live there, yet here you stand. You're not a warlock, yet here you are, able to sense and assess arcane, but also manipulate it. If Jungkook goes against nature for simply existing as a necromancer, then so does every warlock, dragonborn and monstrosities like you."

The lull that falls in the room is broken by Cahira's barked out laugh. "He got you there."

To Jungkook's surprise, Donovan's shoulders relax around a sigh. He brings the hand fan back to his face and shuffles a couple steps back.

"And what's wrong with that damn hand fan?" Taehyung scowls.

"Breathing around you and Jungkook is quite difficult," Donovan explains.

Jungkook can still see the ire that rolls through Taehyung in tempered waves. He touches Taehyung's nape, massaging the curve and alleviating some of the tension in the muscles.

Cahira smacks her mate's shoulder. "Donovan."

Donovan closes his fan, his lips pursed around a small pout that Cahira quirks a brow at. He surveys Jungkook and Taehyung. "Apologies for the harshness of my words. I simply—" He trails off for a brief moment. "The two of you remind me a lot of Cahira and I, I suppose. Her and I had once walked a similar path of unbound yet self-destructive care for each other that has led us to… this," he vaguely waves a hand as he peers around, "but also to consequences that had wounded others. Innocents. However harsh I may have been, I do mean what I said. Always maintain your balance. Do not, and you may become each other's downfall, but also those of all around you."

"We'll try," is all that Taehyung says.

"Good." Donovan draws a small smile. "I'm exhausted, Beloved. I need to rest."

"Of course," Cahira urgently says.

"I have a request," Jungkook starts. He's even more hesitant now, but his curiosity has grown. "I have a companion with me."

"Me?!"

"She's quite special, but I was wondering if it would be alright for me to let her out, and perhaps have her be assessed by Donovan," Jungkook continues, Revna's happy noises ringing between his ears.

"Revna wants to touch the flower like Kookie and Taetae! What if it burns like Kookie's? That means Kookie is reaaally strong and that Revna would be really strong too, right?"

"You can let her out, yes," Donovan agrees. "I have two flowers left. One can be used for your companion, as an apology gift."

Jungkook smiles even if he doesn't mean it. "Lovely?"

"You know, Revna was scared of leaving the ruby, but now Revna is excited if Revna can touch a flower. But Revna will go inside the ruby after, okay?" She rambles while her snout peeks out of the ruby, the rest of her body following suit as she drapes herself over Jungkook's shoulders.
"Revna is hungry. Pretty Dragon gave food but—"

Clatter erupts where Donovan scrambles backward with a gasp. What surprises Jungkook is that Cahira looks scared as well, the latter speaking in draconian and staring at Revna.

"She has been with Jungkook for years," Dahee answers.

Cahira swears. "Basilisk."

"Why would you bring such a cursed creature within Kaiya?!"

"What?"

"Cursed like Woosung's daughter?" Jungkook inquires. "Is she also a basilisk?"

“Basilisks were cursed for a reason,” Donovan mumbles with a shake of head, his trembling hand raising to his face and he looks sick, as though seconds away from heaving. “They cannot be helped. It should not.”

Jungkook’s fingers twitch at the ‘its’. “Why? Do you know who she is?”

“No.”

“She was once a dragonborn.”

“Cursed,” Donovan spits, his gaze wild and far away. “Make it leave.”

“Revna didn’t do anything... Revna is good.”

“ *She* has the mentality of a child and was most likely cursed and sealed as one,” Jungkook snaps and he hands Revna to Taehyung who cradles her in his arms. “We want to help her gain back her human form and be freed from her curse, and perhaps help Woosung’s—”

“Basilisks were cursed for a reason!”

“And why do you think this one was?” Yumi points at Revna.

“I told you too much power lacks balance. Basilisks are unstable monstrosities whose arcanes were given balance through their curse,” Donovan rumbles.

“Revna was a child!” Jungkook retorts. “How could a *child* have done something wrong that’d warrant being—”

“Basilisks were cursed and sealed for a reason! It does not matter which one! Fear, greed, lack of control, the threat they oppose! They *had* to be cursed!”

“Revna promises Revna’s good. Why is the man mean?”

“Her arcane only comes from her venom. All it does is kill *if* she bites,” Taehyung steps in. “Whatever it is that had her be turned into basilisk couldn’t have been as daunting as you make it sound.”

Donovan emits a strained chuckle as he staggers toward the exit door. “I don’t need a flower to know that her arcane would overpass yours and your husband’s if she was to be unsealed. Can sense it. Putrid.”

Jungkook’s gaze darts on Taehyung’s at the same time Taehyung peers at him. “What?”

“That doesn’t warrant a fucking curse on a child,” Jimin interjects.

“Basilisks were cursed for a reason. You cannot help her or Woosung’s daughter. You can’t unseal her. She must remain as a basilisk. The sigil on her head must never be removed.”

“Why?”

“It is what seals her arcane. It is a hex. Remove it, and her arcane will be freed but it cannot be allowed to happen. Basilisks were cursed for a reason, basilisks were cursed for a reason. Basilisks

were—" Donovan dissolves into a mantra of the same sentence, unable to answer any new question that Jungkook may throw at him.

Donovan lets himself be led inside a room that Cahira closes behind them.

A terse silence stretches in the room.

Jungkook shuffles to stand in front of Taehyung. Revna has slithered beneath Taehyung's shirt where she's curled around his chest, only her head peeping out from the collar and resting atop Taehyung's shoulder. Jungkook leans forward to peck Revna's snout then her crown where the white sigil is drawn.

"So… Something happened to her," Hoseok starts. "And she definitely was human once, and a dragonborn."

"I didn't know Woosung's daughter was also a basilisk," Dahee adds. "He must have hidden her seal somehow. We always knew she had been cursed, but…"

"What do you know about her?"

"Not much, unfortunately."

"We've never seen her in her dragon or human form," Junhyun muses. "Only in her current appearance."

Dahee nods and leans against Junhyun. "All that Woosung has told us is that before his daughter arrived here, she had been living on another continent in the West. We never questioned it, as it is not our place to do so, but also because we could feel his grief at the time when he had brought her to Vanae."

"Is Revna evil? Revna is sorry."

"Of course not. You're not evil, Lovely." Jungkook strokes her head, shushing her disgruntled and sad noises.

"My baby could never be evil," Jimin theatrically scoffs. "She's too precious for this world."

"True. If she's evil, then I'm Satan himself," Hoseok vehemently nods.

"You mean you're Satan's spawn," Jimin corrects. "Taehyung is Satan."

Taehyung frowns. "Why the fuck would I be Satan?"

"Case in point. Have you seen that scowl?" Jimin loudly whispers to Revna and points at Taehyung's face. Revna head shifts to survey Taehyung who visibly worsens his scowl to entertain her. "The dark waters that oscillate beneath those empty eyes?"

Taehyung's mouth twitches around a repressed smile but he maintains his role and glowers. "Fuck you."

Jimin sighs with a shake of his head. "I don't think there's anything we can do to save him from himself, Baby. I'm afraid your Papa is a lost cause."

“Shut up! I’m not her—” Taehyung’s mouth closes. His gaze darts on Jungkook. A rosy tint colors his cheeks. “Shut up.”

Jungkook smiles when the discussion prompts laughs out of Revna.

“They’re so silly. Revna loves them.”

When Jungkook translates her words for them, Hoseok and Jimin erupt into coos and pecks that they press on Revna's head, the latter preening and emitting hissed giggles under the attention.

“Plus she could never do anything wrong. Aside from eating raven nixes,” Dahee adds with a pointed look.

Revna hides in Jimin’s arms. ***“Revna loves Fierce Dragon but she can be scary.”***

Cahira comes out of the room and shuts the door. “Let us leave. Donovan will be resting for the remainder of your stay here.”

The group quietens at her arrival.

Everyone dresses in the clothes and armors they had on when they had arrived, the latter cleaned from any blood.

Jungkook and Taehyung both get changed in the same bathroom. They don’t mention what had occurred during the consumption of the pomegranate. They don’t speak a single word. Instead, they exchange looks and touches: one presses a couple pecks on the cheek of the other, while one brushes an arcane kiss on the temple of the other.

It’s not enough, but it will do for now.

When Jungkook and Taehyung arrive, Cahira is holding a glass flower that she gives to them when they reach her. “I would like to see the results.”

“Why?” Jungkook and Taehyung both ask, the latter a tad more gruffly.

“Aren’t you curious too?”

“What do you think?” Jungkook wonders and peers at Taehyung.

“Does she want to try?”

“She does.”

Taehyung’s gaze softens. “Then it’s fine. She can.”

“Lovely, look at the flower.” Jungkook presents it to Revna who timidly peeks out of the ruby.

“Is it for Revna? Like Kookie and Taetae?”

“It is,” Jungkook confirms. “Do you want to try to touch it like we did?”

“Okay…” Revna is unenthusiastic when she bites on a petal of the flower, her fangs piercing through the glass. Her venom immediately erodes the flower that melts into a liquidy, black

substance.

Jungkook drops it on the ground. He watches how the venom gnaws more and more of the flower, however not just. When the glass has completely vanished, the venom stretches to the red grass that it corrodes. It spreads further and the grass visibly tries to fight back the invasive substance but it takes a few minutes for it to seemingly overpower it.

The soil and grass reform themselves eventually, albeit less vibrant, and greyer. The glass flower is gone.

"Oh."

"Now why do you sound sad?"

"Revna don't know. Revna is sad."

"Remember what Donovan said?" Jungkook lifts her head to his eye level. "The less color, the more powerful."

"Your flower turned black right away, Rev. You know what that means?" Taehyung continues.

"That Revna is strong?"

Jungkook translates for her.

Taehyung nods. "Exactly. You're *reaaally* strong. Even more than Jungkook or me."

"Revna wants to fly like Taetae."

"We'll find a way to remove the curse, regardless of the cost," Jungkook says with a pointed look at Cahira.

"No need for the sass, Devourer of Death." Cahira swivels around and begins to walk, the group forced to trail after her. "We have a long walk to the maze."

"Can't we fly there? It'll be faster," Jimin asks.

"You can't shift to dragon here," Cahira answers.

"Wait, what?" Jimin visibly tries to turn but curses when he can't. "Oh that's unnerving."

"Shit. I didn't even realize," Hoseok grumbles.

"Me either."

"How is your mate?" Dahee inquires.

"Shaken. He'll be fine. How attuned he is to the Arcanes comes with an unfortunate cost," Cahira sighs. "Donovan is afraid of arcane."

"You don't say," Taehyung scoffs.

"He has his reasons. Fear can sow much prejudice and scorn," Cahira says, and Taehyung averts his gaze. "While he can be extreme in what he says, he's right in some aspects. Basilisks *were* cursed

and had their arcane sealed for a reason, good or not. So was she.” She glances at Revna.

“But the seal is removable?”

“Perhaps. We haven’t seen a basilisk since Woosung’s visit, and it was decades ago. Prior to this, it had been centuries since we had last heard tales of basilisks. They’ve become legends more than anything.”

“But they were people once.”

“Yes,” Cahira nods. “Dragonborn, warlock. Sometimes humans too from stories I was told, if they had committed grievous crimes.”

"If I may divert the subject of the conversation for a second," Dahee begins, "do you know anything in particular about the plague aside from what we've already told you, Cahira?"

"Nah. All I've witnessed is how it kills and the deterioration of the guardian's organs and breath pouch. But it is a grievous issue that must be solved promptly. I don't want to know what may happen if I die from it."

"Would it disturb Kaiya's balance?" Taehyung quips.

"I know you're being an unruly child," Cahira says to Taehyung who pinches his lips close, "but as a matter of fact, yes, it would. I'm a messenger, but also a protector. If I were to die, Kaiya would lose its ability to keep itself shut from the world. The entrance would be open for anyone to come in. It would be dire. There are ancient, arcanic items and artifacts left here after the Great that cannot fall into the wrong hands."

“The next pulse is in a few days,” Junhyun worries.

Cahira hums. “Let’s hope none of us are hit by it.”

“We'll hopefully unearth clues through Jungkook’s aid, perhaps even more if we find a way to communicate with dragonborns that have died from the plague,” Dahee says.

Cahira’s face knits around a frown. “The guardian has become one with the forest, and I believe his soul has been expunged. Kaiya has been mourning since then. Too quiet.”

“Well fuck,” Hoseok curses.

“It was a long shot considering that the basement in Vanae was emptied from any soul,” Jungkook says. “The plague takes the souls or destroys them.”

“I mean no offense, Cahira, but aren’t you quite old?” Namjoon starts then winces under the glare Cahira pins him with. “Haven’t you witnessed many centuries? You were alive during the Great War, no?”

“I was. However, much of my memories have been lost once I became Kaiya’s guardian. I can’t leave this forest. Any tales I’ve heard from our current world or events that have occurred after the Great War all come from visitors or former guardians. The rest is unknown to me.”

“Could there be a link between Kaiya and the plague? Like, I don’t know, Kaiya being a consequence of the plague? Or vice versa?”

Cahira's tail twitches. "I don't think so. Kaiya has always been its own entity, even before its demise. Regardless of how the plague came to life, considering its scale and unavoidable fatality, it is born from something potent with arcane, and very, *very* old. Ancient. Older than the Elders, considering that they know so little about it."

"Jungkook believes the plague is sentient, something I've also felt. Through the dragon's cry," Taehyung adds. "Can arcane be sentient?"

Cahira chuckles. "You are walking through sentient arcane, Corrupted One. This is not what you should be worrying about when it comes to the plague."

"Then how could a warlock create an arcane ancient, sentient and powerful enough to kill dragonborns so easily?"

Cahira quirks a brow. "How do you know humans have created this plague?"

"Who else could it be?" Taehyung frowns. "Warlocks fear dragonborns. Humans have decimated us to an almost extinction."

"Not everything is black and white. You, married to a human and warlock, should know better," Cahira counters.

"I—" Taehyung glances at Jungkook and Jungkook has to bite back a smile at the way Taehyung's eyes widen. "I know. I— I'm just saying that the plague could have happened during the Great War. If it's that ancient, then maybe warlocks created it to get rid of dragonborns. I don't mean anything by it."

"I know," Jungkook chuckles and loops his arm around Taehyung's. "You're objectively right."

"This is what bothers me about the plague among other things. The timeline," Miseon hums. "It's clearly ancient, yet it seems to have only been going on for a few years. The guardian's death is recent. The plague had never reached Kaiya before that. I had assumed that the forest was safe from it at the time."

"For how long has the plague been going on?"

"The Elders and I have trouble pinpointing an exact date," Miseon continues. "After discovering the plague's existence, we have exhumed and studied dragonborns bodies from the Ice Land. The oldest traces that we could find of dragonborns that have died from the plague date from many centuries ago. However, we have noticed that 13 years ago is when the amount of our people dying from the plague exponentially soared, which is also when we confirmed the existence of the plague. We believe the plague has been occurring for much longer than that, but it was tame and barely noticeable. I assume that any healer who may have remarked something must have discarded it as a mutation of an already existing disease."

"You've known about the plague for 13 years and we're only told about it *now?"* Taehyung's glare snaps on Elder Miseon whose lips pinch into a straight line. "I thought that, at worst, you kept that secret for 3 years. Not over a whole fucking decade."

"It was to prevent mass hysteria and paranoia, Taehyung. I have told you before," Elder Miseon retorts, albeit quietly. "We were afraid such knowledge would lead dragonborns into a second Great War, one that our kind would have not come out victorious of. Again."

Taehyung peers at his mother. “You’ve known for that long too?” Dahee’s silence is enough of an answer. He emits a derisive laugh. “Fucking hell. This is why we were never allowed to go inside that door. It’s why it was kept closed all this time. ‘Cause it was being used as a graveyard for 13 years.”

“I was not given a choice,” Dahee snips but her guilt is evident in the way it wrinkles her face. “And I was afraid, Son. Every three months, every change of season would leave me breathless because every damn time I would wonder if a member of my family would be affected by the plague. If my mate, my father or one of my sons would die the next day or weeks. Every. Single. Time. A part of me thought—” Her head lowers. “Thought that not telling you would keep you safe from it, no matter how foolish of a belief it was.”

Taehyung’s gaze darts between Jungkook and Dahee. Jungkook smiles and lets go of Taehyung to push him toward Dahee.

“I'm sorry.” Taehyung holds his mother’s hand. Jimin holds onto the other while Junhyun dries one of her tears with a kiss. “Thank you for protecting us.”

“Maybe something has triggered the plague’s full awakening 13 years ago, so to speak,” Cahira continues, who does not seem to care about the moment Taehyung and his family are sharing. “Rather than focusing on finding a cure for it at the moment, you should narrow your attention on figuring out *why* it exists. If it is truly sentient, then it must be trying to obtain something. It must have an objective. The plague was created, whether it be by warlocks, nature or the Arcanes itself. I believe finding the answer to this question may unlock a path to a cure, if there is one.”

“How?”

“Not a damn clue,” Cahira grumbles. “You won’t find your answer here yet, it seems, while I thought I would get answers from *you.* What a pointless visit.” She huffs. “The second to last guardian died, and now I’m left alone with Donovan to keep this ungrateful place safe.” She seems to be smacked by wind, her head darting to the side. “Case in point.”

A silence floats in the group as everyone ponders on all that has been discussed.

It’s only after half an hour has passed that Taehyung steps away from his mother to walk up to Cahira who’s at the head of the group. “Have you heard of an arcane eating another arcane?”

“What an oddly specific question.”

“When Jungkook had accidentally raised one of the skeletons there, he had said that what he had felt afterwards felt as though he was being eaten alive. So I’m wondering,” Taehyung shrugs. “The plague could be an ancient arcane that feeds on other arcanes, and since for us our arcane comes from our breath pouch, it’d explain why it’s the first organ it erodes.”

“That… is not completely stupid,” Cahira nods. “Any kind of arcane can exist.”

Jungkook notices something a little odd.

Minsoo and Miseon exchange a look. Then, Miseon’s gaze drifts on Taehyung right as Taehyung’s drifts on her and Minsoo. The three of them look away seconds later.

“Plus when Jungkook had come into contact with souls that had died from the plague, not only were they all gone, but the sole one that had remained had vanished to nothing,” Taehyung continues. “Could an arcane eat arcane *and* souls?”

“I mean...” Cahira trails off to glance at Jungkook above her shoulder. “Necromancy exists. If there’s an arcane capable of this, it would be one of them. It could be some kind of transmutation as well. You may believe that the souls from the plague vanished, but perhaps they were transformed into something else. We must also take into account that arcane can mutate on its own without needing any kind of catalyst. Endless possibilities exist.”

“I guess,” Taehyung muses. “Do you think that souls taken by the plague genuinely vanish forever?”

“Do I look like your necromancer husband?”

“I thought you may have had an idea. Maybe you’ve heard of something like this in your time,” Taehyung says and the tease doesn’t fly over Cahira’s head who smacks the back of Taehyung’s legs with her tail.

“I don’t. Now stop pestering me with this barrage of questions.” Cahira shifts to her dragon form to fly toward Miseon and land on her shoulder. “You know the way to the maze. I will nap until then.”

“Yes, yes.”

The environment is silent for the first few hours, however it increasingly becomes louder, or rather more animated when they eventually come to a halt.

The sound of rustling leaves and snapping twigs happens more frequently, and so do the intelligible whispers that Jungkook keeps hearing. He also catches shadows of faces in some tree trunks, or in the rivers of blood that stream through the forest.

“Elders…”

“Indeed,” Miseon jests.

Jungkook peers ahead.

A high hedge wall faces the group, so long that Jungkook can’t see the end or beginning of it. It’s made of the same red tones that make up Kaiya, however it’s also peppered with a few flowers here and there, along with some vines that slithers to the top.

More noticeably, there’s an opening in the scarlet mural: a corridor that seems to split at the back into paths.

“As I said, reaching the entrance is easy. It’s finding your way inside that is impossible,” Cahira starts, perched on Miseon’s head. “Kaiya fiercely guards what it holds inside, even from Donovan and I.”

“Then why did we bother coming here?” Minsoo pants, clutching onto his prosthetic leg.

“Because Kaiya appears to be fond of the Devourer of Death.” Cahira studies Jungkook then the forest. “Perhaps it’ll allow *him* to enter.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

Jungkook does not hesitate when he steps forward and walks past the maze’s entrance, now at the head of the group.

It’s a little narrow, the two hedges framing him brushing his shoulders and casting shadows in the path from how high they tower over him. When he reaches the end where the cross section is, he moves to go to the right, however a whisper elevates.

“*No.*”

It’s trailed by a pull on his hand.

Jungkook turns left.

“Heard something?” Taehyung wonders.

Jungkook nods.

He listens to the voices as they guide him through the maze.

The sounds of water streams accompany them, growing louder the deeper they walk within the maze. They eventually stumble on some of those rivers, all made of blood where Jungkook can catch faint shapes of faces.

Jungkook does not see any soul.

Time trickles by.

The group quietly slithers through the maze.

It's when they reach a dead end that the voices gain in volume again.

"*Here.*"

"*Here, here.*"

Jungkook inspects the hedge facing him. He does not notice any opening. “They’re telling me it’s here, but…” He runs his hands over the dense branches and leaves. “There’s no way to go through.”

“Then make one,” Taehyung says with simplicity.

Jungkook’s head turns to survey Taehyung when the latter walks up to him.

“Use your flames.”

Jungkook allows his fire to coat his hand and spread across the hedge. To his shock, the branches snap and crack. They move and open in front of him, like entangled fingers parting away. It reveals

a new route before them that is inclined toward the sky.

“See, I expected it to work,” Cahira starts, “but I’m still surprised it did.”

Jungkook huffs a chuckle. “Me too.”

Cahira peers at him from where she’s perched on Miseon’s head. “Shall we move forward, Devourer of Death?”

Jungkook nods and walks ahead.

The slope is steep, Seokjin and Minsoo grunting at the effort it takes to climb up the dirt path.

Around five minutes or so pass.

Jungkook begins to see the end of the route. He halts when he reaches it and steps out of the maze.

The sight before him isn’t so unusual at first.

There’s an immense glade cleared from any tree, bush or plant, aside from the grass covering the ground that seems to be made of rocks rather than soil, surrounded by the maze’s hedges. Everything is red here as well, akin to the one matter that makes the view not so natural: the vast pit that is carved at the center of the clearing.

More noticeably, there are dozens upon dozens of rivers, streams and rivulets. They’re sinuous and jagged, zigzagging and spreading outward from the pit.

Like veins, Jungkook can’t help but think.

“Is that…” Hoseok curses. “Is that really all blood?”

“Sure smells like it,” Minsoo grumbles, a tad breathless and flicking the cap of a bottle that he drinks from.

Hoseok nods and clutches onto Minsoo. “May the Elders be on our side.”

Jungkook closes his eyes and deeply breathes in and out.

He had thought that the feeling and taste of death he had experienced when he had first entered Kaiya had been remarkable, yet it is nothing compared to how it is here, to what he can sense brewing in the rivers, and more coming from the pit. However he can’t quite shake off the conviction that there are more dead somewhere. Hidden.

Jungkook sways on his feet, kept up straight by the arm that curls around his back.

“How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Jungkook answers Taehyung as he lifts his hands. “Hazy.” His flames flicker from his palms, soon expanding across the glade and rivers. His necromancy quivers within him. It basks in the overwhelming smell of blood and death, in the metallic taste it leaves in the air. The usual sense of decay that surrounds him coalesces with his flames, welcoming him in the rocks saturated with it and in the rivers carrying more. “So many deaths.” He glances at Taehyung who draws a small smile. “It’s incredible.”

“Anything we should or shouldn’t do?” Taehyung inquires.

“I’m not sure.”

However there’s one thing Jungkook is certain of.

He’s drawn to the pit.

So much so that he ignores what Taehyung says next, or any of the following questions from the rest of the group.

He has to get closer.

It takes longer than anticipated for Jungkook to reach the edge of the pit, perhaps seven minutes or so. It’s farther than he had first assumed. However when he finally stops right where the cliff begins, he peers down and emits a noncommittal noise of confusion.

At the bottom of the deep pit resides a pool that is more of a lake given its size. What grabs Jungkook’s attention are the high and long rock formations that peek out from the bloody water. He initially believes that they’re simple stalagmites, however when he pays a closer attention to their rounded, curved shape at the top, and the way they create some kind of ring at the bottom of the pit, he realizes that they imitate the petals of a spider-lily, with at its center the lake of blood.

Cavities and river beds are carved on the walls of the pit where, instead of filling it, the current brings the bloody water up the wall and out of the pit, defying gravity.

“Listen,” Cahira says and walks up to Jungkook, the breeze brushing through her hair.

A new series of whispers elevates in the air.

“*It hurts.*”

“*Come. Come with us.*”

“*Heal.*”

They’re clearer now, not as distant as they have been so far. One of them sounds feminine.

“*Heal. Heal, heal, heal.”*

“They are speaking to you.” Cahira meets Jungkook’s gaze. “Kaiya is.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Jungkook whispers, the ache in his chest not solely his own, but also *theirs.*

“Hear their plea, their yearning, their anguish. Watch and listen.”

And so Jungkook does.

He surveys the pit more closely. His eyes trail after the whispers when they shift more to the right.

It’s faint at first, enough for him to believe he’s imagining it, however he can see it: the way the lake of blood takes the slightest blue tint when light cascades onto a tame wave. The blue dissipates

from the water. It appears again where the rock petals of the spider-lily converge at the middle. It spreads outward, only to be swallowed by red once more seconds later.

It's like a heart that pulses.

Kaiya's heart.

Jungkook's flames inch inside the pit. They're tentative, and the second one of them nearly comes into contact with the lake of blood, the water grows erratic. Waves crash against the wall that they taint in carmine splatters.

"*Yes! Free!*"

"*Free!"*

"Free! Free! Free!"

The voices jumble together into a litany of *'Free'* and *'Heal'*. The pulsating blue tint in the lake becomes brighter, its glow even visible to the rest of the group.

"Is this a soul? The blue thing?" Jimin asks but Jungkook doesn't respond.

Jungkook attempts to touch the souls with his flames from where he's standing at the edge of the pit. However the blood is too dense. Something prevents him from reaching for the crying souls. He withdraws his fire.

"I need to go down," Jungkook declares.

"*In* the pool?" Taehyung asks.

"I can't breach past the surface with my flames alone."

"The cliff is too high for you to jump if the lake is shallow," Cahira observes. "I can't carry you down, and none of them can shift to their dragon self or bring forth their wings."

"Do we have a rope?"

"Maybe the lake isn't shallow?"

"Sure. Why don't we push him off the cliff and pray that he doesn't splatter across a fucking rock at the bottom," Taehyung snaps at Hoseok who raises his hands in the air.

"Can't he just slide down one of the cascades?" Namjoon proposes.

"The upward current is too strong," Elder Miseon says. "Gravity wouldn't be enough to pull him down."

"I can help." Yumi lifts her hand, sitting on her boulder familiar that she jumps down from. "Can you fly down?" She tells her familiar. It floats above the pit. When it tries to lower inside, it seemingly hits some kind of invisible shield.

"My wind also can't get in," Taehyung says after breathing out a cone of wind. "Any idea, Cahira?"

“It’s the first time I’m allowed within the maze. Whenever I would attempt to walk inside, Kaiya would lead me astray and back to the entrance. I know as much as you do about it."

“I can’t help them if I can’t go down,” Jungkook snips. “I need—”

“I found a way.” Yumi points at the bottom of the lake where a door floats on the surface, the latter soon swallowed by the carmine water. Her boulder familiar spits an identical door not far from the group. “We can create doors from anywhere, and we don’t have to worry about passing through any kind of barrier since we can simply appear on the other side of it.”

“That certainly works,” Cahira nods.

“Right?” Yumi skips toward the door and unceremoniously swings it open.

A sea of blood bursts out of the door and flings Yumi across the ground. Jungkook is nearly thrown off his feet as well by the current, however Taehyung catches him in time. Taehyung pulls him close and holds him in his arms to turn Jungkook away from the door as Taehyung takes the brunt of the current.

“Close the fucking door!”

“Seokjin,” Minsoo shouts.

Minsoo, Seokjin and Dahee eventually manage to slam the door shut.

“Eww. Kookie and Taetae are* dirty. *Everyone is.”

“Fucking hell.”

Hoseok groans. “I’m gonna throw up. I have blood all over me. I’m covered in blood. May the Elders protect me. O Oracle, may you purify me from the sins that have painted us on this—”

“Are you alright?” Taehyung worries. He breaks the embrace to cup Jungkook’s face, fruitlessly trying to wipe away the blood.

“I’m good,” Jungkook reassures with a smile. He’d peck Taehyung’s cheek if it wasn’t for the blood coating Taehyung’s face and body as a whole. However Jungkook isn't phased by the blood, and so he presses his lip against the apple of Taehyung's cheek.

Taehyung clicks his tongue and uses the clean front of his shirt to wipe Jungkook's mouth. "That's disgusting. Don't do this."

“Well!” Yumi claps her hands once in a wet noise. “The door seems to work, but I’m not sure as to where it leads exactly aside from within that pool.”

“I don’t like this,” Taehyung grumbles. “What if the door is actually opened to somewhere else? I don’t trust her nor this forest.”

“It’ll be fine.” Jungkook lifts two fingers that he hovers over his own mouth to bring a kiss of death between Taehyung’s furrowed brows. “I’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“There may be a safer way,” Dahee starts.

“I don’t think so,” Cahira says as she taps an acute nail on the edge of Yumi’s door.

“With all due respect, how would you know?” Dahee frowns. “Jungkook should not be taking such risks.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Taehyung says.

Jungkook bites back a smile at how Taehyung and Dahee mirror each other’s glower that drifts between Cahira, Yumi and the lake. “They need help. I can provide it to them. I know it. I’ve done it before. Hundreds of times.”

Taehyung’s shoulders slump with a sigh. He presses an aerial, warm kiss on Jungkook’s temple with two of his fingers. “Be careful.”

“I will.” Jungkook removes Revna’s necklace to fasten it around Taehyung’s neck. “You stay with Tae for a bit, okay?”

Revna’s head peeks out of the ruby. ***“Kookie, be careful. Kookie can’t die, or Revna will be sooo lonely that Revna will cry, and Kookie don’t like when Revna cries.”***

“I’m not gonna die, you brat,” Jungkook laughs.

“I’m assuming a raven would be useless?”

“Yes,” Yumi chips in.

Yoongi glares at her.

Jungkook walks up to the door that he halts in front of. He feels something touch his thigh but he doesn't see anything when he looks down at his drenched pants. He grabs the door’s handle. “Push me inside and close the door behind me. You can open it again if you don’t see me come back in 90 seconds.”

Minsoo, Taehyung, Seokjin and Dahee join him.

“Are you sure?” Taehyung presses.

“Yes. I can handle it.”

Jungkook does not hesitate when he pulls the door open.

Blood gushes from it again and it takes a strong shove on his shoulders for him to breach past the doorway and intensity of the current.

A snap erupts.

Then a click.

The door closes shut.

Jungkook is floating in the blood where he holds his breath. The sensation is odd, the water thicker than what his body and mind would expect it to be. His gaze darts around, surprised that he can do so.

Red is all that surrounds him. There's some bits of light coming from above him. He swims toward it. Or rather tries to. But all that it does is bring him deeper within the lake's depth that looks endless. So he stops and waits.

Something rushes past him and knocks against his back.

His head swivels around.

Nothing.

"No. No. Wrong."

"No, no, no."

"*Wrong.*"

The whispers evolve into a deafening cacophony of cries and anguished noises. Faces appear up and down and right and left.

"*Help. Heal."*

"Please, please. Heal. Free."

The pulsations of blue are present, however scattered everywhere, making it impossible to pinpoint the exact source. Jungkook's lungs begin to burn. No matter how much he tries to swim and move closer to the surface, he only sinks deeper.

The panic is sudden.

It feels like his own but not just.

His flames swirl around in the lake, trying to grasp onto something, but it meets nothing aside from the blood that gains in intensity. The whispers are agitated. Waves begin to sway Jungkook. One is especially virulent and propels him through the water. The voices gain in desperation, but also in anger.

"*Why aren't you helping?*"

"*Help us."*

I don't know how to, Jungkook thinks but can't speak.

His vision blurs the more the seconds elapse. The lake is more of a mad sea now, the waves hurling Jungkook around and dragging him lower and lower. He can't even see the door anymore.

77…

78…

79…

I'm gonna die.

Jungkook is going to die.

Just like that.

Donovan's words resound in his head.

"Confidence is a slow and insidious killer."

Jungkook had thought that he could handle it on his own, that he didn't need anyone's help. But the door is gone and the others may not be able to open it anymore. He's all alone here.

The voices get louder and louder no matter how much Jungkook tries to quieten them when he presses his hands against his ears.

His heartbeat thuds in his temples. A new wave throws him through the water. His back collides with something and his mouth parts open around a silent gasp against his will. What sliver of air he had left disappears into bubbles. Liquid fills his mouth and travels down his throat.

Jungkook begins to drown in the blood.

What was he thinki—

A lullaby tears through discord.

Something moves in the right pocket of Jungkook's pants and crawls out of it. It takes him a few seconds to realize what it is: Yumi's lizard.

The stormy ocean of blood comes to a standstill. The once virulent, crashing waves now quiver in place. The shapes of faces and limbs curl away from the lizard and bring Jungkook with him.

The lizard's muzzle opens. And it opens some more and it never really stops as it widens more than it should be able to without ripping itself in half. The lullaby's melody hastens. The water starts flowing toward the lizard. It's as though the voices and souls are forced to swim toward the familiar, beckoned inside the mouth.

"*No!"*

"Free us!"

"Don't go!"

"No … die again. "

Jungkook is helpless as he watches the lake of blood being swallowed by the lizard.

The souls might die because of him now, because they'll be devoured by Yumi's familiar that trembles on its spot.

The lizard's body roundens and swells beyond what it should be capable of. It fattens and fattens the more it eats and drinks to an absurd size that would rival the one of an adult dragon. The

reptile's eyeballs erratically dart in any and every direction in their sockets, its consciousness seemingly gone.

The lake becomes less full as the lizard slowly empties it from its content. It's shallow enough for Jungkook to see the ground below him amidst his hazy vision.

It's not as much of a ground as it is a land of corpses and bones, all ripped from the rocks they're buried into and siphoned toward the lizard's mouth.

Jungkook frantically swims away, fighting against the current the lizard is creating, but also against this voice at the back of his mind compelling him to be closer to the source of the lullaby. He grabs onto a skull, the bones of a hand or a chest to propel himself farther and farther away from the lizard.

He sees another pile of bones ahead of him. It's still something to grab but it crumbles within his grasp when he tries to hold onto a spine that is too big to be the one of a human.

He can feel his consciousness recede.

His lungs scream for an air he can't find.

Jungkook swims and pushes himself forward and he gasps as his head finally emerges out of the lake for a brief respite. He thinks he hears his name being called but he's not certain. He gulps for air and coughs, but a metallic aftertaste invades his mouth seconds later and he drowns anew.

Objects — limbs, skeletons, bodies — knock against him or scratch his skin when a sharp broken bone snips past his temple.

His fingertips bump against something, a hard surface he pushes himself onto with unsteady movements, threatening to tip back into the whirlpool. He finds some kind of column that he wraps his arms around as the water lowers around him.

Moments later, air is sent back into his burning lungs and dizzied brain. His ear rings but it's nothing compared to how *loud* the lullaby is, how it even submerges the sound of rushing water.

"—kook!"

"It's your … doing this?!" A voice yells from far away.

"Jungkook! The door … anymore!"

"Call it back!"

Jungkook pants in-between two coughs, his chest heaving up and down.

"What … doing?!" It's Yumi, her voice slithered with an edge Jungkook has never heard from the warlock. "Come back!"

The lullaby quietens, and the silence that suddenly befalls in the pit of death is eerie at best, terrifying at worst.

Jungkook blinks and spits some of the blood. His head turns to look behind himself.

The familiar is morbidly *grotesque* : a round balloon that sways in the middle of the pit's ground. Any carcasses, skeletons or blood is gone, only a few puddles left behind.

"…me?!"

Jungkook's head darts up. He can't really tell who it is at first from how deep the pit is, but someone is kneeling at the edge of the cliff and peering down at him.

"Viper!"

"I'm fine, Tae! I'm fine," Jungkook repeats, however for himself this time. He pulls himself up along the column. It's only once standing atop the surface that he understands that the column is a bone, more precisely the one of a dragon's nose bridge.

The ridiculously inflated lizard lolls from side to side. The head is comically minuscule compared to the distended body and scales, and it'd be funny if it wasn't for the blood dripping from the lizard's muzzle, or for the half fossilized arm dangling at the corner of its mouth, slurped seconds later.

Everything is so *quiet.*

The pulsating blue is gone. The voices are gone. Their cries are too, and the small crevasses and river beds carved along the side of the cliff are emptied from any blood.

Jungkook glares at Yumi. "Tell your familiar to spit everything back out!"

Yumi says something but Jungkook can't hear her. What he can see, or rather feel, however, is the unadulterated rage that oozes from her form.

"Call it back! Yumi," Jungkook shouts but Yumi does nothing, similar to Cahira who looks surprisingly calm next to her. Jungkook's attention shifts on the lizard itself. "Spit everything out! You ate Kaiya's heart! They aren't yours to devour!"

The lizard doesn't listen nor relent. It simply rolls from side to side. It makes gurgling sounds as it seemingly tries to digest the feast it has consumed, its belly rippling.

Jungkook clenches his trembling fingers, his muscles taut. He trudges along the dragon skull's snout and drops down. As he reduces the distance between himself and the lizard, he crouches at some point to snatch one of the bones protruding from the ground. It's some kind of broken dragon femur.

Jungkook pauses in front of the lizard that towers over him. He tilts his head backward and extends his arm. "Spit it out," he seethes and presses the acute tip of the bone against the reptile's belly.

The lizard emits a tired noise trailed by a bubble of blood that pops.

"Spit it out. All of it. Don't, and I'll open you up myself. Spit it out." The tip of the bone sinks into the lizard's belly. "Spit. It. *Out.* "

The reptile continues to rock back and forth until it suddenly freezes. The eyes that had been darting in all directions snap on Jungkook where they settle.

It stares.

The lizard *does* have some kind of consciousness, no matter what it may be, and it elicits a shiver that runs down Jungkook's spine. It makes some gagging noises. The ripples on its belly increase, the skin stretching even more.

Jungkook does not get to shield himself when the lizard's mouth parts around a spray of blood and everything else that it had swallowed. He's propelled backward and soon enough, he's submerged by the lake once more.

This time he thankfully finds an anchor in the large dragon skull that is dislodged from the ground by the spray. It floats on the water. When Jungkook stands at the top of the skull, the lizard is gone, and the lake is back to what it had once been, the rivers on the pit's wall flowing upward again.

Jungkook crouches. He observes the bloody water.

There's no soul.

Even after dipping his hand and spreading his flames in it, he can't see any blue glow.

A motion catches his attention, something that drifts in the water and floats toward him

Jungkook grabs it when it bumps against the edge of the skull.

He lifts the lizard out of the lake.

Its body is back to its regular size. The lizard peers up at Jungkook. Its tongue flickers out. It rolls onto its back, displaying its distended belly that is visibly withholding something. It opens its muzzle and it must try to expel what was left within itself but it struggles, hissing and chirping.

"Come back!"

It's Yumi.

"Were you helping me? Helping them?" Jungkook wonders. "Even now?"

The familiar whines.

"…back! Right…"

Jungkook sits on his knees and carefully holds the lizard with both hands. He presses his thumbs on the distended belly but it doesn't aid.

"Come! Back! Now," Yumi continues, her yells growing more and more hysterical.

The lizard's gaze darts between Yumi and Jungkook. The fear is evident in it, and Jungkook's confusion toward the familiar's intention heightens. Jungkook glances at Yumi who's extending her hand toward them.

The lizard had always looked normal. Its appearance never had anything particular about it. Yet, as Yumi's lips move around words Jungkook can't hear, the green color of the reptile changes. It becomes more gray and brown.

The lizard *decays*.

Its skin is sunken, sticking onto its bones, as though the body is drained from any blood. It coughs and writhes in Jungkook's palms. It pats its own belly and doesn't look away from Jungkook. As it opens its muzzle, Jungkook understands.

Jungkook inhales and exhales. He shifts his hold on the small reptile to free one of his hands. He peers inside the throat. Only darkness greets him. "Fuck. *Fuck.* Okay, okay, okay. I'm gonna— Okay. I'm doing it."

With careful motions, Jungkook slips his hand in the lizard's mouth.

He winces when he feels some goo, but a certain disorientation overtakes the disgust because the inside of the belly doesn't feel like what it should be. There's no guts. No organs. At least none that he can immediately feel. More importantly, the lizard's stomach feels endless, so much so that Jungkook can easily push his full forearm inside.

He can't find whatever it is that the lizard is still keeping.

Flames coat his fingers, and Jungkook watches with an ever growing bewilderment how the lizard begins to regain its colors as it absorbs some of his fire.

Yumi's eyes widen. She's watching too. She speaks again.

The lizard decays anew.

Yumi is *starving to death* her familiar.

Questions rush in Jungkook's mind one after another. None find any answers except for one: if Yumi can starve the lizard, then Jungkook can feed it, it seems.

He does so as he feeds more of his flames to the familiar and his necromancy must overpass Yumi's because the lizard relaxes in his palm as it fully regains its color and health. Jungkook's arm sinks deeper, up until it touches something cold, something that he has felt so many times in the past.

When he pulls his hand out of the lizard's muzzle, a large, blue sphere is held between his fingers.

It has some lines of black in it — *Jungkook's fire.* It looks like a globe of glass that has been broken, yet is now glued back together. He can't tell how many souls there are, but he can feel that it is more than one, that this sphere is several thousands of souls if not more that have been collected and are now kept together due to his flames, and perhaps due to the lizard.

The sphere floats out of his hand to tumble on the lake. It's not submerged by it. Instead, it remains atop of it, as though solid.

" *Yes! Stronger together!"*

"More, more, more."

The lizard doesn't look dead anymore, but it's a little livid and panting. He brings forth his flames, allowing them to be eaten by it. "Did you… Did you do all of this to help the souls?" The lizard doesn't nod nor gives any indication that it has heard him. It curls into a ball in Jungkook's palm and closes its eyes.

Shapes of limbs appear in the lake, washed away seconds later by a wave. Blood arms reach out toward the blue sphere.

“Stronger! Together.”

“Showed yourself… Show ourselves.”

“Must show… Ourselves.”

“More.”

“Not here,” another voice says, the feminine one from earlier. *“More. Show.”*

The souls are stronger now that they have merged together, however they have also made themselves inaccessible to the blood. To Kaiya’s heart. Jungkook attempts to help the soul pass and find peace, thinking that it may be the solution, however it doesn’t work. Something prevents it from happening.

The souls still have an unfulfilled desire.

“Can you sing a… A song that soothes the soul but also arcane?”

It’s only after Jungkook has fed the lizard more of his flames that a new lullaby floats in the pit.

Jungkook’s latent agitation vanishes. His muscles relax. The sphere of souls doesn’t look as tangible as it had been anymore. It’s more nebulous and translucent. The crashing waves in the lake are now tempered, tamed down to a faint sway.

The sphere lowers onto the lake. It spreads across the surface in some kind of blue veil. The voices are hushed, but Jungkook can still feel their presence. The veil expands before withdrawing on itself. Again and again. It resumes its pulse.

Badum. Badum. Badum.

The lullaby stops at some point, but Jungkook feeds the lizard, and it starts again as the two of them pacify Kaiya’s heart.

Wind howls.

A whistle.

A touch on Jungkook’s forehead, tender.

Then, a drop.

Something cold that lands on the tip of Jungkook’s nose. When he looks up, the sky is clear, yet light, pastel pink beads fall from it.

Water abruptly surges.

However instead of defying gravity and flowing out of the pit to deliver its sustenance to the forest, this time the blood scurries *inside* the pit. The pulsations of blue in the blood heightens. It’s as though every remnant of life and death that exists in the forest is converging toward this place.

Kaiya has been called forth.

Badum, badum, badum.

The blood begins to fill the pit more and more. Soon, the rock formations in the shape of spider-lily's petals are all submerged by it. The water lifts Jungkook and the skull he stands on, up until the lake reaches the surface of the cliff.

The lake pours out of the pit and begins to spread across the ground and toward the maze's hedges.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. Get me out of here," Hoseok curses. "Fuck this." He climbs on top of Yumi's familiar where she's already sitting.

The blood continues to overflow the area. Ravens of ink fly in the air, all occupied by a member of the group. Unlike the rest of the group, Taehyung looks calm, a certain look of fearlessness draped over his form. His trust for Jungkook.

Jungkook remains where he is on the dragon's skull as he watches the sight before him.

Soon, the maze and forest as a whole are drowned in blood. Red stretches across the horizon. Endless. Meeting the sky in one, scarlet painting.

"They have heard your call," Cahira says in her human form, perched on a raven.

The lullaby quietens.

More drops trickle from the sky.

"Not again," Jimin winces.

"The trials?" Dahee asks.

"No." Cahira observes the sky for a moment. Her lids flutter shut as she tilts her head backward. "It is not rain."

"Then what is it?"

"Snow," Jungkook and Cahira both say in unison.

It begins to snow more and more, filling the air with its rosy snowflakes.

The pulsations in the ocean of blood have slowed down, more at peace, steadier.

"*Come.*"

Jungkook listens.

After tucking the lizard in the pocket of his vest, he approaches the water and dips his hands in the blood. Something gently holds them. His flames fan out in the ocean, mingling with the blood but also with the veil of the souls that continues to slowly pulsate.

Jungkook has been welcomed, at last.

The water shifts.

Limbs and faces break out of it, and rather than disappearing as they have up till now, they remain.

They morph together into a mass that forms a bump on the ocean. A talon crawls out of it and finds support on the water's surface. A second talon joins it, trailed by two limbs that are linked by shoulders, all made of rippling blood whose drops melt back into the ocean.

The creature is immense, bigger than a human, and as large as a dragon.

A head appears next, or what Jungkook believes to be a head.

There isn't any face, per se, but rather some kind of mask made of ivory bones where carmine rivulets dribble down. Two, tree-like horns arc at the side of the mask, splitting in several branches where skulls of humans, dragonborns and animals hang from.

A humanoid chest emerges next.

Cracks elevate in the air as a horizontal fissure breaks at the lower part of the creature's mask. The forms of bloody human-sized hands peek out from the slit and begin to pull apart the bones, creating an opening there.

It's hard to see what's inside at first, the cavity dark save for the carmine hue that can be seen when some light catches on the side, however the fissure in the mask widens some more, like a mouth stretching open.

"Closer."

"Closer…"

Pleas continue to fall from the mouth in the mask. The bloody limbs erupting from the lake continue to merge with the creature's body that gains in height, its shape becoming more defined, looking more like a female's torso now. The blue sphere pulsates where a heart would be, faintly glowing there. It's eerie, the way the creature is embraced by the blood.

It rises higher and higher *and higher.*

The snow is light around Jungkook, cold where it lands on his skin and stays.

The creature stands, even if it does not have any visible legs or feet. Instead, it wears what Jungkook can only describe as a macabre robe that is made from the human-sized bloody arms, heads and torsos.

No one speaks a word, whether of fear, shock or awe.

When the creature's head lolls forward, a second split forms, this time high up where a forehead would be. The edges of the slit are pushed outward by a carmine bump that ripples, something shifting beneath it.

The bump blinks, for lack of a better word, and an eye is displayed in the vertical cut.

The pupil darts around.

Searching.

It settles on Jungkook.

"*Devourer… Of Death. Must…"*

The timber is predominantly feminine, but it's echoed by coalescing whispers of voices belonging to men, children and elders, like an echo of the souls that have lived and live in this forest.

"*Devourer of Death* …" The creature extends an arm toward Jungkook that does not remain in the air for very long, soon crumbling into globs of blood that blend back with the ocean. "*Must… Devourer… Must…*"

Everything else vanishes from Jungkook's care, his attention commandeered by the creature.

"*Sacrifice…* "

Jungkook watches the way more bodies of blood crawl up the creature, encircling the waist. The snow is loud, thudding at every pulse of his heart.

"*Devourer… of Death*. *Sacrifice…* "

"Sacrifice?" Jungkook echoes, his voice laced with reverence and respect for the entity before him.

"*Gift.*" As the creature rasps this word, the sphere of souls begins to thrum in its chest. "*Gift. Gift. Gift.*" The creature forms a new limb from the ocean. It holds something in the talon. It looks like a simple blood stick at first, however it stretches on one side at the end of the cane, sharpened where both edges meet at the end. Akin to a blade.

A scythe.

One that grows and grows the more the creature pulls it out of the ocean.

"*Gift. For you.*" The scythe has skulls merged in the blade of blood. Shadows of faces can be seen on it, whose lips mouth the next words. "*For us… Devourer of Death… Sacrifice.*"

"Sacrifice what?"

"*Peace.*"

The creature lifts its arm, casting a shadow above Jungkook. It brings the scythe close to him and carries a gust of air in its wake. It's gentle when it taps the tip of the blade at the back of Jungkook's hands, leaving behind a drop of blood that trickles down the sigil marking his skin.

Jungkook peers at the entity's eye, the red iris full of a curiosity that he can somehow feel.

"A gift," Jungkook begins, his gaze riveted on the creature. "My gift to you. Yours to me."

Jungkook walks down the skull and toward the entity. He should sink when his feet touch the ocean, however he's held up to the surface, by bloody hands and palms that support his weight, by a welcome and acceptance that shields him. "Because Kaiya used to be a place of exchange. *You,* were such a place."

No words are spoken, however a hum answers him. It's trailed by the mask tears a little more where the mouth is, akin to a smile of approval.

The pulsations of the blue sphere speeds up, and Jungkook doesn’t know how he’s so certain of it, but he can tell it’s happy.

Expectant.

“*Our gift…*” The creature withdraws the scythe behind itself. It carves an arc in the ocean in the same motion and it becomes greater and taller, collecting more blood in its wake. “*To you.*”

Jungkook halts a few feet away from Kaiya that endlessly towers high over him, yet he feels like an equal.

Like a friend.

The snow’s fall slows even more, up until it stills, its flakes remaining airborne.

Jungkook is calm, even as Kaiya carries the scythe above them. His lids flutter. One of the snowflakes catches onto his lashes. He closes his eyes. He exhales and inhales. His palms raise, his fingertips touching one another.

His arcane is beckoned outside, and he allows it to seep out of him.

Cold hands climb up his ankles, then his legs and chest that are hugged. When he opens his eyes anew, he can feel how the sigils on the back of his hands slither up his shoulders and down his sides to meet the bloody hands.

The ocean of blood darkens.

Soon, obscurity oscillates in its stead.

The scythe is braced over Jungkook's head, and it swings down.

It’s painless as he drowns.

Taehyung watches as the creature cleaves through Jungkook with the scythe of blood.

He's not given any second to process the sight nor prevent it from occurring as Jungkook is swallowed by what had once been an ocean of blood, now turned to a pitch black sea.

A gargantuan wave explodes outward from where Jungkook and the creature are. The raven supporting Taehyung splatters and he tries to shield his face, however he and the remainder of the group are hurled away.

A grunt is punched out of Taehyung when he smacks against something and rolls across the ocean. He expects himself to be submerged by the water, yet he does not. He's not certain on what is below him, but it’s some kind of soft ground now.

Taehyung rushes to his feet and looks around.

A veil of darkness has fallen on the area.

Taehyung can't see *anything*.

The ocean is gone. The sky is gone. Jungkook and the creature are too. Taehyung calls forth a flame around his hand but it barely illuminates his fingers and wrists.

"Is everyone well?!" It's Dahee, her voice not far from Taehyung.

"Yeah!" Jimin answers.

"Come to my voice!" Dahee instructs. "I believe we aren't far from each other!"

It takes some tentative steps, however Taehyung follows the voice of his mother who continues to speak. Soon enough, the group reunites. The dragonborns able to summon fire do so, even if the light is half absorbed by the darkness.

"Where the hell are we?" Minsoo grumbles, one arm held by Hoseok and the other by Woobin.

"I… I don't know," Cahira whispers. "Where is the boy?"

"I can't see him."

"Me either," Namjoon says and Yoongi curses. "The thing kept saying 'sacrifice'. I'm worried."

Taehyung isn't, which is odd because he expects himself to frantically search for Jungkook, for the fear to consume him as it had once before, however it does not. Perhaps it's due to the door the pomegranate had opened, but Taehyung can distantly feel the presence of Jungkook's arcane.

Cahira crouches, carrying with her some fire in her palm. "Spider-lilies."

Taehyung looks at the ground where some of the flowers are lightened by Cahira's flames. The buds of spider-lilies look dead, of a black hue and withered. "Anything we can do about the darkness?"

Cahira's mouth parts open to speak, however it's drowned by a loud, resounding rumble.

Taehyung squeezes Jimin's hand when it finds his own. He steps forward and when he does, a squelch follows suit as his shoe sinks into wet ground.

"Anyone hearing that?" Hoseok wonders.

"Yeah. Water?"

"I think it comes from wherever these go." Taehyung nods toward the few carmine streams he can see in their direct vicinity and beneath their feet, all flowing through the spider-lilies' stems and disappearing in the darkness.

He tosses a vast fireball toward where the sound comes from, several yards away.

There's a large puddle of blood there.

Something bursts out of it. It's a hand followed by a head. A gasp flares. It's hard to distinguish who the person is, the face and body as a whole covered in blood, however Taehyung *knows* it's Jungkook.

"Is that Jungkook? Jungkook," Yoongi shouts. He makes a move to run toward the figure but Taehyung stops him.

"Don't."

"Why—"

"Let him be."

Jungkook comes out of the puddle, solely lightened by the ball of Taehyung's fire that floats above him. Jungkook crawls onto his knees then rises to his feet, his vest and shirt gone. Some of the blood drenching him slides down, displaying patches of skin here and there.

Taehyung immediately notices how Jungkook's tattoos erratically drift across his arms and hands.

Jungkook's respiration pants in the silence. His body rocks from side to side. He does not seem conscious. At all. He does not respond to Namjoon and Jimin calling his name. He does not budge from where he's rising on the puddle that ripples and moves, the latter looking more like a cavity in the ground that he hovers above.

He sways on his spot when his head tilts backward. His strands of hair are wet where they dangle at the back of his head, his eyes closed.

Jungkook looks ethereal, praised by carmine and lightened by gold.

The puddle gargles.

Taehyung realizes how it isn't much of puddle, but rather the mouth of the creature that had struck Jungkook, the mask of bone peeking from the ground and stretching in front of him.

Jungkook stands on its blood tongue, held up by it.

An object made of bones drifts out of the gigantic mouth in the ground. It's brought toward Jungkook's face by a heap of bloody palms and arms that all merge then split and reform together every few seconds, like a living entity.

The object is some kind of goblet, holding in its midst a blue, nebulous orb, one that Taehyung assumes to be some kind of soul.

Hands of blood slither up Jungkook's body, twisting around it. A few halt at his face that they cup. Jungkook's lids flutter open, but he still seems unconscious, his expression aghast. The fingers probe at his lips that they part a little more.

Seconds later, the nebulous orb *liquefies*.

It sloshes in the goblet, the substance keeping its bright blue tint.

In a way that is full of care, of something that would resemble piety, the hands of blood tip the goblet against Jungkook's lip, offering him the substance. Jungkook drinks, and a drop of a

translucent teal trickles down his chin and throat.

Jungkook's tongue flicks at the corner of his mouth. One of his arms rises to bring two fingers to his neck. He collects the blue trail of the liquid that he drags to his mouth and cleans from his fingers.

Jungkook remains immobile for a moment.

Then, his lips curl upward, displaying teeth splattered with blood.

A shiver crawls up Taehyung's spine.

The bloody hands cradling Jungkook's face and head withdraw, falling back inside the creature's mouth. Jungkook loses some of his balance without their support, wavering on his feet. The goblet has vanished too.

Jungkook's head lolls forward. When he pulls back his fingers, a black flame links them to his mouth. It looks more like a liquid rather than fire. It even coils around his hand and arm where blue pulsates in the veins and spreads toward the chest.

His right arm extends.

Black fire is summoned, however it is the same as the one that had left his lips: a liquid substance, one that mingles with his tattoos.

Raven drops fall one after another from his palm.

Taehyung glances at Jungkook's feet.

The creature's tongue and masks seemingly fuse with the ground below Jungkook. The thin streams and rivulets running through the spider-lilies expand and darken. Taehyung understands what is happening before it even begins.

A photosynthesis.

A spider-lily near Jungkook visibly drinks the blood, its dark gray petals gaining in red. It must absorb some of Jungkook's necromancy as well because shadows of black paint the stem and bottom of the bud. The flower quivers.

It's not enough.

It's missing light.

The creature must know as well, because the same gargantuan limb that had held the scythe appears anew from the puddle of blood.

It cleaves high up above Jungkook, snuffing out Taehyung's fireball in the process.

A cut appears in the darkness. It's more of a raven dome, one that begins to melt in an onyx rain that Taehyung knows the creator of. It's only when the dark veil of Jungkook's necromancy has fully vanished that Taehyung gets a full scope of where he is.

A field of black spider-lilies surrounds him.

It stretches down the horizon, up until it meets the light red of the sky. There must be thousands upon *thousands* of withered flower buds.

None of them has burgeoned. Not yet.

As the light of Kaiya's moons bathes the field, it enlivens.

The spider-lilies near Jungkook all take a bright, scarlet color as they gorge onto the blood, the moonlight and Jungkook's necromancy that spreads across the field in a neverending raven cloak.

Taehyung wouldn't be able to look away from Jungkook if he were asked to. Goosebumps flare on his skin in tides, raising the hair at the back of his head. His lips part around a shaky sigh. It's hard to breathe, the air dense with Jungkook's arcane that consumes everything else. Something is still missing, however, and Taehyung isn't the only one to notice it.

"The gifts," Cahira rasps.

"But it is not the place where they are given," Elder Miseon says.

"They must be given here," Cahira responds. "It is Kaiya's demand."

Cahira turns to her dragon self.

The roar that tears out of her throat is deafening, louder than what her small body should be able to create.

The ground quakes beneath Taehyung. The entire field is shaking. Sounds of rocks grinding against each other can be heard, then of metal clinking together.

All of a sudden, an immense chain whips out of the field, then a second, a third and more, all yanked by an invisible force and pulled toward the sky. The ground rumbles louder as it's broken open on two spots where what looks like horns begin to emerge from. Next is a head, or rather a muzzle.

A dragon's head.

It's made of rocks and bones, with moss and a few spider-lilies sprouting from some cracks and fissures. The rest of the body is hauled out of the soil. The chains remain upright in the air, faintly swaying to the breeze that lightly courses through the field.

There's a series of stairs carved in the dragon's tail that coils around its chest then forelimb, leading up to the side of the opened muzzle. The dragon is sitting on its hinges, and while Taehyung knows it is a statue, it still feels alive in a way, like everything else in Kaiya.

"What…" Elder Miseon's throat clicks when she swallows. "What should we do, Cahira?"

"I do not know. Nothing like this has ever happened," Cahira says as quietly as Elder Miseon has spoken. "The Statue of Exchange does not *move.* Yet— Yet it wanted me to awaken it. It has come here."

Sounds of rubble breaking cuts through Cahira's next words.

The right limb of the dragon twists around another snap as it extends ahead. The balled up talon slowly crackles up with twitching motions. The gnarled index uncurls around puffs of dust and pebbles. The claw points forward.

More specifically at Jungkook.

The statue remains immobile afterwards.

Jungkook still appears comatose as he begins to stagger toward the dragon. His left leg lifts, then unsteadily moves forward, and when the sole of his foot touches the ground, the spider-lilies' buds around it brighten in color, and bend to the side to make way.

Every step that Jungkook makes is accompanied by a pulse of red beneath him, like drops of carmine ink dispersing in black water.

By the time Jungkook has reached the statue, scarlet has overtaken the entirety of the field.

Taehyung watches with bated breath when Jungkook places a palm against the acute claw of the dragon’s talon. Then he holds his breath as Jungkook uses the claw to slice his skin from the right palm to the elbow, doing the same with his left arm.

Blood seeps from the two wounds.

Taehyung catches glimpses of Jungkook’s tattoos flowing down to his hands where they disappear.

The flowers quivers more and more and more and—

Everything stills.

Not a single sound can be heard, not even a gust of wind. No one dares to speak. Anticipation thrums in the air as everyone watches.

Awaiting *something.*

It comes in the form of a taste, at first: of metal and rot, of something that has died and lived again only to die anew. Second, is a smell: decayed and clean, harmonized together with this hint of grim. Third, is touch: cold and phantom, yet suffocating. Fourth, is a sound: of rustling leaves and rivulets of water.

Lastly, is a sight: blossom.

The petals of a spider-lily uncurl and softly peel open. It carries an azure bead in its scarlet core.

A soul.

The misty blue bubble floats out of the spider-lily, drifting high toward the sky. Another spider-lily blooms, trailed by one more. Soon enough, every single flower has blossomed. What had once been considered as the vestiges of someone’s death now comes to life once more, even if fleetingly.

But freely.

Jungkook’s necromancy is *divine.*

It engulfs each and every single cell of Taehyung. It is nothing like what it had been before. It's different. More potent, richer. It feels like the purest sense of death.

Taehyung catches the way everyone else reacts to Jungkook, like so many have done in the past to Taehyung: with fear yet a certain veneration. For Taehyung, however, the former does not exist. All there is instead is an unadulterated pride and selfishness that wretches at his guts and stifles his throat.

It is Taehyung's husband who stands there.

His Prince of Death, laid bare and made to be revered.

Akin to a devotee facing their God at last, Taehyung nearly bends a knee before Jungkook. An aerial force compels him to: unexpected, enraptured, yet dedicated. However Taehyung can barely exhale, if he is breathing at all. His mind can't conceive the idea of drawing a phantom touch across Jungkook's godskin, let alone move any further, too preoccupied with exalting all that Jungkook makes.

Jungkook's necromancy is like a pearl of pure jet, so precious that it would shine in the darkest night.

It's terrifying.

To want to take so much from someone.

To crave to give even more.

Taehyung feels like the soul of a drowning man for the second time in his life, and he finds an anchor on Jungkook again.

The field surrounds Jungkook in its never-ending red, the latter peppered by the misty blue beads of the souls that float all around before some begin to fade away in little particles that converge toward Jungkook then dissipate.

"Beautiful…" Cahira murmurs, and Taehyung rips his eyes away from Jungkook for a second. Cahira laughs, tears sliding down her cheeks. "They weren't gone. They were here, waiting to find peace." She smiles at Jungkook. "Devourer of Death, Mender of broken souls."

Jungkook's head lifts, the wounds on his arms gone. His lids flutter open, his eyes still fully black. He leans against the talon of the dragon's statue and he looks disoriented from where he surveys the field and last remaining souls flickering alight in the sky.

Jungkook's gaze finds Taehyung.

Taehyung's heart stutters.

His prayer is mute, spoken in the aborted motion he makes. Jungkook's approval is too, bestowed with a tired smile.

Taehyung approaches Jungkook with a tentativeness he hasn't felt for the Prince in a while, but he can't deny any longer these intangible, delicate threads woven around Jungkook and pulling him closer.

When he pauses a foot away from him, Taehyung stills.

He takes a moment to catch his breath, to muster enough courage to reach out for Jungkook who feels so untouchable and hallowed. When he finally manages to graze the back of Jungkook's hand with a featherlight brush of his fingertips, it's only due to Jungkook's fingers that reach out first, gracing Taehyung with a touch.

Taehyung wipes away some of the blood, displaying the missing tattoos. “Your arcane…”

Jungkook must try to summon his flames, but nothing occurs. “It’s… gone. Kaiya said I had to sacrifice something.”

“I can sense it. In every way. Everywhere. Your necromancy isn’t gone, it’s still there.” It’s exalting, transcendent and all-powerful as it reigns over Taehyung and commandeers his absolute faith.

Jungkook silently surveys Taehyung, his hair bloody, akin to the rest of his body, yet looking everything that is sacred.

There’s a yearn that swirls within Taehyung.

He wants to travel back to their home. Now. He wants to prepare a bath for Jungkook, help him get rid of the grime sticking to him. He wants to make a meal for them afterwards, cook one for Revna as well and have the three of them dine together on the living room’s fluffy carpet. The food always tastes better like this, for some reasons: when they’re huddled at the bottom of the couch and reading a book together, or when they're discussing something and anything, or when they simply exist in the same space without exchanging a single word.

Then, Taehyung wants to lay in bed with Jungkook.

It used to be an odd thought to have, wanting to be close in such intimate ways with someone. It still is sometimes. But it’s…

It’s Jungkook.

It’s the same Jungkook who rambles in Taehyung’s ear about this or that before dozing off amidst a sentence and intelligibly mumbling in his sleep. It’s Jungkook who scoots closer to Taehyung to cuddle up against him, or sometimes downright throws himself over Taehyung in a weighted blanket.

It’s also Jungkook who holds Taehyung’s hands, hugs him and soothes the pain in his shoulders when the ghosts of Taehyung’s past crawl back to haunt his nights.

There is a lot he wants from Jungkook. Too much, probably, where Jungkook’s greed seems feeble compared to Taehyung’s now. He can’t even decipher what half of those wants are, nor why they exist with Jungkook only, however he keeps in mind his discussion with Jungkook. He allows himself to cup the side of Jungkook’s face for a second to brush his thumb on the apple of the cheek before letting go. “How do you feel?”

“Wonderful.” Jungkook peers up where remnants of souls still dot the red of the sky before drifting toward him. “It’s breathtaking," Jungkook says, and Taehyung can only hum in agreement as he

traces the shape of Jungkook's face. Jungkook’s gaze flickers back on Taehyung. “You aren’t even looking.”

“I am.”

Jungkook’s head tilts to the side. His smile holds something to it that Taehyung can’t quite decipher. “One would think I have hung up one of Kaiya’s moons in the sky with the way you look at me.”

“The sky is puny," Taehyung whispers and can’t refrain himself from gorging a little more on Jungkook’s scent and his arcane and his touch when Jungkook cups the curve of Taehyung’s throat. Taehyung feels inexplicably safe, in a way he has never known.

Perhaps Jungkook is mending Taehyung too.

“How is it?”

Taehyung blinks a couple times. “Mh?”

“My arcane,” Jungkook smiles. “How is it now?”

“Divine,” Taehyung whispers as he closes his eyes and he curls an arm around Jungkook to pull him closer if possible, bind them with one another. “Precious and… infinite. It feels as though it could consume me.”

"Would you let it?"

"Who would dare deny you any tribute?"

Jungkook emits a soft, hummed chuckle as he reduces what sliver of distance is left between them. When he speaks, his words are uttered close to Taehyung's mouth, like a favor awarded to him. "What if I want to harvest your soul, Taehyung? Your mind, your heart… Would you still let me? What if…" There’s a shine in Jungkook’s eyes. He exhales, his grip tightening on Taehyung. "Taehyung… I want… I want so much.”

“Speak it. It’s yours.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

Jungkook chuckles again but it sounds a little pained this time, as though a cry is hidden beneath it. "I believe I may desire the impossible."

"It's still yours to have."

“Catch me,” Jungkook demands, but Taehyung hears the plea forged in the words. “I want you to catch me. No matter when I fall. No matter how I fall. No matter why I fall. I want to be caught by you, and only you.”

Taehyung gently holds Jungkook’s hand. He carries it to his mouth. Then, with a reverence that thrums in his chest and arcane, he presses his lips against the back of Jungkook’s hand. “Anything.”

Jungkook pulls his hand free and his arms find their way around Taehyung's neck as he buries his face there, seemingly uncaring of the blood too. "I'm really tired."

"That tends to happen after freeing Elders know how many trapped souls, among other things."

Jungkook amusedly huffs and leans back. He peers to the side where the group approaches them, Cahira at the head. "They've gone to sleep."

"They have," Cahira smiles then deeply bows. "Thank you, Jungkook."

"Apologies for breaking the… moment," Namjoon starts, a hand raised, "but I'm extremely worried about what happened to Jungkook. It was his arcane clouding the sky, no? And the black rain that fell when the veil melted. And he used so much of his necromancy and helped so many souls pass. What is his gift? Was that his gift? Everything that happened?"

"It was indeed," Cahira confirms with a nod.

"Is there any way to know what said gift is, exactly?" Namjoon continues.

"He will figure it out in his own time. I never know the countenance of the gifts that are given, unless they're a blatant axe in one's back."

"It's the second time someone mentions this," Namjoon mumbles. "What if it happens to me? Or to Yoongi? Or to you?" He glances at Jungkook. "Are you okay?"

"I feel good," Jungkook says and steps away from Taehyung. Taehyung tries not to be too disgruntled at this but miserably fails. "Really good. Kaiya said that what I had to give is a sacrifice, but it doesn't feel as such. It feels fated, as if it was meant to happen, as if I was meant to be here."

"Perhaps it is. I am one to believe in fate," Cahira says with a pointed look at Taehyung who discreetly rolls his eyes.

"Has every soul within Kaiya been freed by Jungkook?" Dahee wonders.

"No." Cahira's expression sobers. "Only those in this field. Kaiya has countless more dead. There may be more fields like this one, or other places in the forest where trapped souls could be freed from. Kaiya is immense. One would never be able to fully explore it, unless guided by it." She pauses then sighs as she takes in the scene around her. "It must have protected this place for so long, hoping to find peace. Perhaps this day marks the beginning of spring."

Jungkook makes a soft noise as he props his head on Taehyung's shoulder. "I do love spring, even if winter is my favorite season."

"And both seem to love you as well," Cahira says with a knowing smile. "I believe it is a good time for everyone to receive Kaiya's gifts, as the Statue of Exchange has been brought here. I can also sense Kaiya's exhaustion. It needs rest, and so do you. I'd like for you to visit again in the near future, under more peaceful circumstances."

"What about the guardian who died?"

Cahira sighs. "I don't know how to reach them, if his soul is still present. I assumed Kaiya would lead you to it, if it were still protected, but…"

“Maybe my gift will be of aid in contacting the guardian, if he’s still reachable?” Jungkook muses.

“Do you remember what happened in this field?” Taehyung asks.

Jungkook shakes his head. “The scythe is the last thing I saw, then I woke up here in front of the statue.”

“The…” Taehyung pauses. “The blood hands had a goblet. I think it had a soul in it that was liquefied, one that they made you drink.”

“I drank a *soul?”*

“Presumably.”

“Souls are usually spheres of a bright, translucent blue. Was it like this?” Jungkook questions and everyone nods. “And Kaiya gave it to me? Why? Was the soul my gift?” He peers at Cahira who shrugs.

“I wish I had more answers. I’m curious too,” Cahira says. “No exchange has ever happened like this, nor here. You didn’t even have to climb.”

“Either way, something happened to your necromancy. We’ll have to find out what, exactly, as soon as possible,” Taehyung interjects. “I have to visit the Elders. You should come with me, so they can perhaps help us figure it out, and if not, we still have plenty of questions to ask them regarding the plague and other matters.”

“I thought we’d have some answer after traveling here, however we’ve ended up leaving with even more questions,” Dahee laments.

“I’d rather have that than answers smacking us across the face in the worst ways possible,” Namjoon grumbles. “I don’t know about you, but I could use some peace eventually. Actual peace.”

“Oh there you are.” Yumi peers at the lizard that climbs down Jungkook’s leg and scurries toward her. “You and I will have a talk later.”

“What was all that about with it?” Taehyung whispers to Jungkook.

“I’m not sure,” Jungkook answers as quietly. “It helped me, but I don’t know why. We can talk about this when we’re home,” he adds with a glance at Yumi.

“The Statue of Exchange marks the end of your visit, and the limits of your body,” Elder Miseon starts, commanding the attention of the group. “As I said before, Kaiya is no place for the living. You mustn’t stay here for any longer than a day at most. We may reconvene in a few days to prepare a second visit.”

“Will we go through the Night Terrors again?”

“No,” Elder Miseon gently smiles. “It will not be required.”

“How do we proceed with the gifts?”

“You must walk up the stairs. You will find a basin in the dragon’s mouth where your blood must be offered,” Cahira explains. “Once done, the aspect of your gift will be determined, and you will then receive it.”

“And we can’t refuse our gift,” Namjoon worries. “God. I hope I get a good one.”

“That is up to fate,” Cahira huffs.

“If so, I shall leave first,” Dahee announces and straightens her spine. “I—”

“No. I’ll go first,” Taehyung interrupts. “Just in case.”

“Son, y—”

“I’ll be fine,” Taehyung assures and squeezes Jungkook’s waist once before stepping away. “I want to make sure it’s safe up there.”

“Of course it is,” Cahira snips with a snide look at him.

Taehyung peers at Jungkook who’s sporting a frown that twists his mouth. Taehyung taps the underside of Jungkook’s chin. Jungkook purses his lips but draws a smile when Taehyung quirks a brow at him. “I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful,” Jungkook says.

“Yeah.”

Under the scrutiny of the group, Taehyung makes his way toward the start of the stairs that are carved on the dragon’s tail. He’s slow as he begins to climb, his gaze darting here and there. He halts once he reaches the top of the statue, standing at the edge of the opened muzzle. He steps a wary foot on the tongue.

Nothing happens.

He observes the teeth-like rock lining the outer part of the upper and lower jaws. He glances to his right where the mouth and throat of the statue is.

There’s some kind of stone, bird basin deeper in the mouth. When Taehyung approaches it, he notices two life-like statues perched on the edge of the bowl: a crow on the left, and a hummingbird on the right. Both are leaning toward the basin, yet their eyes are set on Taehyung, even when Taehyung shuffles to the right, their gazes seemingly follow him without moving.

He crosses the rest of the distance.

The basin is devoid from any water or other content.

With a deep inhalation and gust of his wind, Taehyung slashes at his palm. He lifts his fist above the basin and lets his blood ooze from the wound. The red drops fall onto the stone one by one, rolling down to the small hole carved at the center of the bowl.

The statue of the hummingbird moves. Its head cracks backward while its beak opens. The cork of a vial peeks out of it with a paper attached around it reading the word *‘Drink’*.

“Taehyung?!”

Taehyung startles, a strangled squeak wrenched in his mouth. “Shut the hell up!” He shouts back to Hoseok.

“I was worried, asshole!”

Taehyung grumbles and takes the vial. The latter is filled with a black, thick liquid. He flicks the cap open and smells the vial’s content. The scent is familiar. It’s one he has met before but that he cannot put a name on. “Don’t have a choice anyway,” he tells himself, then, without hesitation, he drinks the liquid.

The taste is also familiar and Taehyung clicks his tongue when he still can't figure out its origin. The vial fizzles out from his hand.

An alien sensation flares in his chest. It’s not painful, per se, but it’s also not comfortable. It’s more like an ache in a sore limb that eventually dissipates. Taehyung expects something else to occur, but nothing really does as he stays there for a minute. He frowns and walks up to the front of the mouth to say “I’m fine?! I drank some kind of potion though!”

“You what?!”

"Why would you drink it right away, you dumbass!"

That's a good question Taehyung does not really have any answer for. He had just… known.

He had to drink it.

“Come down,” Dahee shouts back.

Taehyung does. He joins the group once more and explains what he has seen up there and adds “The hummingbird moved.”

“Ah. Well.” Cahira shrugs.

“Well?” Jimin presses. “What does that mean? What was that vial?”

“Crows are usually a sign of bad omen, while hummingbirds symbolize good fortune. Does the hummingbird giving me my gift mean that it’s a favorable one?” Taehyung wonders. "I assumed it would."

“Well observed, Corrupted One,” Cahira mutters but there’s a certain look of approval that relaxes her face.

“Does it?”

“To some extent, yes,” Cahira confirms. “However both birds can be the one to grant the gift, which then indicates that it is neither advantageous nor harmful, but rather some kind of middle ground.”

“Then—” The rest of Taehyung’s sentence dies in his throat when a sharp pain pierces through his chest. “F-Fuck.”

“Son!”

“Taehyung!”

Taehyung lowers to his knees. He clutches onto his chest with a hand, his respiration heavy with loud pants. Hands grip onto him, voices yell in his ears, but all that he can focus on is the overwhelming sense that he’s *choking.*

Something is trapped at the back of his throat.

He tries to swallow it but it doesn’t work. He heaves but nothing comes out either, not even air.

“ *Move,* ” a voice commands. *Threatens.*

The hands around him are yanked away, replaced by firm ones that straighten him up from where he's kneeling on the ground. Tears spring in Taehyung’s eyes as he suffocates. Fingers tighten around his chin and they tilt his head back while others pry his lips open.

It’s Jungkook, who's standing before Taehyung and peering into Taehyung's mouth, his gaze alert.

With poise and sharp agility, Jungkook unceremoniously shoves two of his fingers inside Taehyung’s mouth. Taehyung is about to push him away when they trigger his gag reflexes, however before he can do or say anything, whatever matter clogging his throat is yanked out from it.

Taehyung gasps and coughs. He slumps on his hands when Jungkook releases him. “F–Fucking hell,” he croaks out. He looks at what Jungkook is holding and freezes. “A nix?”

“The raven bell,” Jungkook adds.

“Oh,” Elder Miseon says.

“Huh,” Cahira provides too then pensively hums to herself. “Odd.”

All of a sudden, a new kind of pain throbs within Taehyung, this time in his breath pouch. It snatches his breath away. It’s worse than it has been so far and he swears to the Elders that he might die from the pain if it doesn’t stop soon.

“Minsoo,” Jungkook demands.

“What the fuck is going on.” Minsoo crouches next to Taehyung.

“Getting worse,” Taehyung whispers to his grandfather.

“I thought he was supposed to receive a gift with a positive outcome!” Jimin snaps.

“What do we know about raven nixes?” Jungkook asks.

Taehyung focuses on the way Jungkook’s hands rub soothing circles on his back, on Jungkook's scent that appeases the pain the slightest bit.

“Nothing much,” Minsoo mutters. “They react to dragonborns and supposedly have healing properties, but the latter is just a theory. The raven bell could be a positive neutral plant, like the

golden bell."

Taehyung doesn't hear a voice, per se.

It's more like a compulsion, one that slither in his mind and through his limbs. It overtakes his consciousness for a moment, his thoughts reduced to one, whispered word: *'Eat'.*

He *has* to eat the raven bell.

He needs to.

It's wrong that it — *they* — were taken out of him. He has to give it — *them* — back.

Taehyung does not realize that he has moved. He doesn't even notice how he has swallowed back the raven bell before it travels down his chest and fizzles out somewhere near above his heart. The second the weight of the raven bell vanishes from within him, the pain does too.

He lies down on his front then turns to sprawl on his back, his chest heaving up and down.

Jungkook's face appears above him, clouding the sky. Revna's head peeks out from the necklace that he's attaching around his neck. " *'Taetae, I thought eating black nixes was bad',* Revna exclaims, and yes. She's right," Jungkook snips. "We agreed on *not* doing that, Taehyung."

"I never ate raven bells," Taehyung weakly protests.

"Lies," Minsoo retorts and rises to his feet with a light kick on Taehyung's hip.

"Not in *years*," Taehyung corrects. "I'm fine."

"You coughed up a fucking nix," Jimin glowers. "You're not fine. What the hell is that gift?"

"An odd one, for certain," Cahira says, her gaze settled on Taehyung. "Your demeanor changed before eating it back. Why?"

"I felt like I had to eat it, as if I needed to? And the pain stopped afterwards," Taehyung explains. A myriad of theories and questions rush through his mind, none that he can speak out loud yet. Similar thoughts must riddle Minsoo because his eyes snap on Taehyung. "But the gift has to be good. The hummingbird gave it to me."

"It should be, yes, but I wonder," Cahira hums.

"Revna, do you feel like you *have* to eat the raven nixes?" Revna hisses at Jungkook's question. "She doesn't. She said that it tastes good, but she doesn't feel compelled to eat them at all."

"So the effect is different on Taehyung?"

Dahee sighs before pinching her lips into a straight line.

Her gaze meets Taehyung's when he sits up, and guilt churns in him.

She knows he's been hiding something from her, that he has given her half truths.

Taehyung averts his gaze.

“Well. If he says he’s fine, he is, isn’t it?” Dahee says, her voice clipped.

Taehyung grits his teeth.

“I haven’t noticed anything different from him either,” Minsoo adds but it only worsens Dahee’s aloofness whose glare darts on her father.

“So that’s my gift, then? Coughing up a flower then being forced to eat it back?”

“We could use my ring of arcane detection next time it happens,” Yoongi offers. “If there’s a next time.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Taehyung agrees. “Let’s hurry it up.”

“I’ve been starting to feel weird for a little while,” Woobin chips in.

“Me too,” Junhyun nods.

“You’re feeling alright, Taehyung?” Jungkook worries.

“Peachy. Just want to sleep for ten years.”

Jungkook chuckles. “Me too.”

Taehyung watches his mother climb up the dragon’s statue from where he’s sitting on the ground.

When she comes down minutes later, Dahee looks positively *mad.* Even Minsoo is cautious when he heals her palm, stepping away once done as his gaze drifts between Taehyung, Jimin and Junhyun.

“Darling,” Junhyun starts, then clears his throat when it cracks toward the end. “What has happened?”

Dahee speaks. Words curl around her tongue, however in a language that has been long forgotten and is now considered dead.

“Huuuh,” Taehyung and Jimin wisely say.

Dahee talks some more, an urgency and irritation coating her voice as more draconian words tumble out of her mouth.

Cahira barks out a laugh. “How unfortunate,” she snickers but even her subdues under the fury that bleeds out of Dahee’s form.

“You can only talk in draconian?” Taehyung asks after rising to his feet.

Dahee makes a dismissive motion that can easily be translated as *‘What do you think?’*

“*‘Bullshit crow,’* is what she said,” Cahira translates. “I supposed this hourglass you’re holding is for however long you will be stuck like this,” she adds and nods toward what Dahee is holding. “*‘This is why I have been berating you to learn draconian. However none of you ever wanted to. Now I am stuck speaking a language only this ancient dragonborn can translate’,* is what she said.”

“I have a question,” Jungkook begins. “Does Revna get her own gift?”

“Yes,” Cahira answers. “I believe so.”

“What about my familiars?” Yumi wonders next.

“Familiars are not counted when it comes to Kaiya’s gifts since they are simply that: arcanic familiars.”

“Works for me!”

Taehyung smiles when a series of excited clicks and hisses erupt from where Revna is draped over Jungkook’s shoulders.

“Alright, alright, I got it,” Jungkook sighs. “You can go next. You can bite yourself for the blood, if you’re fine with it?” Revna enthusiastically nods. ”Go ahead, then.”

Revna slithers down Jungkook’s body then toward the Statue of Exchange. Taehyung is a little tense when she vanishes from his view at the dragon’s muzzle. She eventually emerges once more a moment later. Revna makes her way toward them, holding a vial in her mouth.

Jungkook picks it and her up, he and Taehyung surveying the content of the glass potion.

“Which bird gave it to you?” Taehyung asks.

“The hummingbird,” Jungkook translates. “There’s also a piece of paper that says *‘drink’.* ”

Jimin gasps. “What if it gives her human form back?!”

“She’s obviously very excited at this prospect,” Jungkook says as Revna undulates in her little dance in his arms, "however let’s not anticipate anything this extreme, okay? Or you’ll be disappointed if it’s not what happens.”

Revna snorts a huff but cutely nods her head.

Taehyung retrieves the vial from Jungkook as he shuffles in front of him. He opens it and peers at Revna. “Ready to drink it?”

“Should we wait before having her drink it?” Jungkook says with a concerned frown.

“I don’t think it matters much. Who knows, Jimin may be right,” Taehyung says. Jungkook nods after a lull. “Ready, Rev?”

“She says *‘Taetae hurry up,’* ” Jungkook replies.

Taehyung pours the vial in Revna’s muzzle. She shudders.

“That tasted bad.”

Taehyung stills.

“Did it? How bad?”

“Reaaally bad.”

The voice is child-like, the one of a little girl.

“How do you feel?” Jungkook asks Revna.

“Normal. It just tastes bad. Like Fiery Dragon’s cooking.” Jungkook emits an aborted snort and visibly bites back a smile. ***“But, Kookie, you know what tastes better?”*** Revna’s head lifts to Jungkook’s eye level.

“I don’t.”

“Black nixes.” Revna bumps her snout against Jungkook’s nose. ***“Can Revna have one?”***

“Stop being such a brat.”

“But Taetae could eat one. Why Revna can’t have one too?”

“By the Elders. By the Elders!” Jimin downright *giggles.*

“Oh my God,” Yoongi whispers.

“Holy shit.”

Jungkook’s face knits around a confused frown. “What is it?”

Dahee pushes everyone out of her way — including Taehyung who steps backward — to walk up to Jungkook and enthusiastically talk, a wide grin curving her lips.

“Did everyone hear this?!”

“So that— That wasn’t just in my head.” Namjoon exhales a deep, long sigh. “Thank God. Thank *God.* ”

“Yes I did! Holy shit. I’m gonna fucking cry.” Hoseok and Jimin are the next one to rush toward Revna, a group soon forming around her and Jungkook that Taehyung watches from afar.

Jungkook hands Revna to Jimin and says “Can someone enlighten me?”

“We can hear her,” Taehyung quietly answers, his vocal chords tightened.

“What?”

“We can hear Revna.”

“What?!” Jungkook’s head swivels toward Revna. “Oh my God!”

“You can hear Revna?!”

“Yes we can!” Jimin and Hoseok answer.

Revna’s giggles ring between Taehyung’s ears. ***“You can hear Revna!”***

“Her voice is so small and cute,” Jimin mumbles as he rubs his forehead against her crown. “You must be so young. My baby... You sound so cute. You’re my daughter now, okay? I'm adopting you and you’ll come live with me.”

“Hey!” Jungkook interjects and playfully glares at Jimin who’s shielding Revna from Jungkook. “Can you really hear her?”

“Yes!” Several people exclaim at once, including Dahee — although in draconian for her.

“Oh my God, I can't believe it.” Jungkook retrieves Revna that he hugs. “I’m so happy for you, Lovely. You can talk to them as you’ve been wanting to for so long.”

“Revna can?” Revna’s head turns toward Taehyung. ***“Taetae?”***

“Yeah.” Taehyung clears his throat where a lump swells while he rapidly blinks. “I can hear you.”

“Taetae can hear Revna. Taetae can…” Revna emits a small sob. ***“Taetae can hear Revna. Revna can talk to Taetae, and Taetae will hear.”*** Taehyung gently holds Revna when she stretches toward him, cradling her against his chest. ***“R—Revna isn’t lonely, but sometimes Revna feels lonely, because she wants to talk to people, but people don’t— Don’t understand. And Revna’s so happy. Revna is happy. Taetae, Revna is so happy.”***

Taehyung curses and soothes Revna’s quiet cries while trying to hold back his own. “We can talk together now, yeah?”

“Elders,” Jimin sighs and blows his nose on Hoseok’s sleeve who’s wiping his own eyes.

“What if it’s temporary?”

Everyone’s shared glower snaps on Yoongi, uttering his name with a dark warning.

Yoongi lifts his hands in the air. “Forget I said anything.”

Revna makes a dejected noise. ***“It’s temporary?”***

“I’m sure it’s not,” Taehyung hurries to comfort her. “But if it is, we’ll find another way to communicate with you, so everything’s alright.”

“Okay.” Revna sniffles. ***“Taetae can really hear Revna.”***

“I can, Rev,” Taehyung smiles and when he nudges his nose against her snout, she giggles.

“Revna loves Taetae. Can Taetae hear?”

It’s a testimony of Taehyung’s unparalleled discipline that he manages to not break into tears at Revna’s preciousness. “I could hear it,” he croaks out and sniffles.

“Taetae loves Revna?”

“Of course I do,” Taehyung mumbles through trembling lips and, really, he does tear up a tiny bit when Revna’s hiccups and little sobs echo in his head.

"Okay. Revna is happy Taetae loves Revna." Her muzzle turns toward Yoongi and Namjoon. ***“Can Inky and Smarty hear Revna?”***

“I can,” Namjoon answers with a bright grin.

“Me too,” Yoongi says with a smaller smile.

“Revna loves Smarty and Inky.”

“What about me?” Jimin asks next.

“Revna loooves Pretty Dragon.”

“She calls me ‘pretty dragon’,” Jimin boasts to Hoseok with a pompous smirk.

“Revna loves Sweet Dragon too,” Revna says with a nod of her head.

“Oh. S—Sweet dr—” Hoseok’s lips pinch as he throws his head back and stares at the sky. “I love you too.”

“There, there.” Jimin pats Hoseok’s back.

“What name do I have, Dear?” Junhyun says.

“Cute Dragon!”

Junhyun looks surprised at first but then bursts into laughter. “You are even cuter, Dear.”

“And this is Funny Dragon.” Revna nods toward Seokjin. ***“Funny Dragon makes Revna laugh the most.”***

“*I* don’t make you laugh the most?” Taehyung mutters.

“No. Funny Dragon does."

“Well alright then,” Taehyung mumbles then pinches Jungkook when the latter snickers at him.

“My greatest achievement,” Seokjin proudly smiles.

Dahee speaks as she peers at Revna.

“You’re Fierce Dragon,” Revna exclaims.

Dahee chuckles and talks some more.

“Yes, because you’re so fierce and strong. Revna loves Fierce Dragon.”

Dahee answers, and just like before, Revna does too.

“Thank you,” Revna says with a happy lilt to her voice.

“Revna,” Taehyung carefully starts, “you can understand what my mom is saying?”

“Mhm. Taetae can’t?”

Taehyung, Jungkook and Dahee glance at each other. Dahee speaks again.

“Fierce Dragon is saying that Revna should repeat what she’s saying right now if Revna really understands. Revna understands. Lying is bad.”

“I thought draconian was a dead language?” Namjoon wonders.

“Draconian isn’t spoken by any dragonborn aside from those who have specialized in learning languages and dialects, like Dahee,” Junhyun explains. “It has been a dead language for centuries, so much so that studying it is quite intricate since most teaching books have been expunged during the Great War. I wouldn’t be surprised if most of our Elders also cannot speak it.”

“Then how come *Revna* understands it?”

“Because Revna is smart.” Revna petulantly snorts, eliciting chuckles around her. ***“And, you know, Fierce Dragon makes mistakes sometimes. It’s—”*** The rest of her sentence is spoken in draconian. ***“Not—”*** Some more draconian. ***“It’s like what Kookie teaches me about past tense, but Revna still makes mistakes too. It’s hard and Kookie isn't nice when he teaches.”***

“Is Dahee making grammatical errors?” Junhyun asks.

“Yes."

“Another confirmation that she’s a dragonborn, isn’t it? I've never heard of a warlock being able to speak draconian, unless their arcane is related to languages in some ways, but even then…” Yumi trails off and there’s this glint in her eyes that Taehyung does not like. At all. "How old are you, Revna?

"Revna doesn't know."

Yumi walks toward Taehyung.

Taehyung hands Revna to Jungkook. A staccato rumbles in his chest.

Yumi hears it because she halts and tilts her head with an infuriating smile. "Donovan said your arcane overpasses Taehyung and Jungkook's." Her crazed look doesn't stray away from Revna. "You *are* young, as Jungkook had told me. Yet you're fluent in a language that had only been spoken centuries ago. Aah…" Yumi picks at the skin at the corner of her mouth. "May I—"

Taehyung seizes the front of Yumi's attire to push her away from Jungkook and Revna. "Don't think for one second that you can make her your familiar."

"You've held your end of the bargain, and I will hold mine. I'm simply curious."

Taehyung throws Yumi away.

"Revna really doesn't like Rotten."

"Rotten?" Everyone echoes.

Revna points at Yumi with the tip of her tail.

Seokjin, Jimin *and* Yumi guffaw.

"I like it." Yumi peers at her lizard. "What do you think?"

"Moving on from the basket case," Taehyung dismisses, "why Revna can speak draconian? Really well at that."

"We don't know how long she remained in the scroll Jungkook accidentally freed her from," Yoongi says. "She must have been sealed in it a *long* time ago."

"So…" Taehyung tentatively peers at Jungkook. "About those raven nixes…"

Jungkook levels Taehyung with a deadpan look. "We'll see at home."

"Maybe if Revna eats more mixes then Revna can speak more languages. Did you think of this, Kookie?"

"Don't sass me," Jungkook reprimands.

“Oh she’s even more of a brat than I thought she was.” Jimin happily sighs, a hand over his heart. “Come with Pretty Uncle,” he says and steals Revna from Jungkook again. “Your papa has to convince your dad about the raven nixes, so let’s have fun together in the meantime, okay?”

Taehyung’s cheeks and ears burn at the appellation. “Stop with this nonsense.”

Dahee snickers.

“Hm? What did you say, Mom?” Taehyung jests and he tilts to the side to dodge the fireball his mother flicks at him.

“Can you lot hurry it up and stop dilly dallying,” Cahira says with a temper. “I’d like to go back to my mate, and I’m exhausted too.”

“I’m going next.” Hoseok makes his way toward the dragon statue.

A yelled *‘Hummingbird’* trailed by a cackle erupts in the field.

Hoseok appears at the top of the statue, his back to the group. He theatrically pivots around. There’s a pair of glasses perched on his nose. “Isn’t it slick?! I got glasses! Oh!” Hoseok runs down the stairs, nearly tumbling at some point. He runs up to Jungkook and halts in front of him. “Oooh.”

“What?”

“It seems that I can see the arcane properties of objects with these on?” He points at the glasses. “I could see from above what Revna’s necklace is made of and stuff. Interesting. And useful in Eden.”

“What does it say for this?” Yoongi brandishes a bracelet.

“Nothing.” Hoseok hums. “It must be limited, then. Maybe by time or location? I’ll visit Hyuna to figure it out.”

Taehyung surveys the group. “Who’s nex—”

“Both birds gave me my gift,” Minsoo announces as he suddenly appears next to Taehyung. “I don’t feel any different. Time will tell.”

“Not knowing what your gift is is the worst option,” Seokjin laments. “My turn.” When he comes back, it’s with a perplexed look. “The crow moved for me. I don’t notice any odd changes in me or my arcane.”

One after another, the remainder of the group obtain their gifts.

Namjoon is granted one from the hummingbird: a colorful plant held under a glass bell whose properties have yet to be deciphered, however Hoseok proposes to Namjoon to join him during his visit to Hyuna's brothel. Woobin also receives a favorable offering in the form of an old, decrepit manual filled with lessons regarding ice related arcane.

Junhyun comes down from the Statue of Exchange with some sort of large jewelry box whose drawers, once opened, display an array of different spices along with a book of recipes. The group speculates for a moment about his gift that had been given both by the crow and hummingbird, coming to the conclusion that some of the spices and, or recipes may have nefarious effects.

Elder Miseon, privileged when it comes to her gifts — according to a disgruntled Cahira —, is given a rich smelling pie made from her favorite ingredients.

"Mine was the hummingbird," Jimin says. "My arcane feels a little different? Kind of? Not sure in what way. I could use my fire and metal breaths just fine, so I'll have to experiment to figure it out."

Yoongi goes to retrieve his gift next.

Unlike most of those that have come back down, Yoongi does so with a pained look. He marches toward Elder Miseon. He sniffs at the pie. "Fuck."

"Yoongi?"

"I can't smell anything anymore," Yoongi reveals. "My gift was from the crow and hummingbird."

Jimin makes an aborted motion to touch Yoongi but retracts his hand before he does. "You can't smell anything at all?"

"I can't smell the field, or your perfume, or this fucking pie. I can't. I won't— I won't be able to smell flowers anymore," Yoongi rasps and covers his eyes with one hand, his lips pressing into a trembling line.

"Anosmia," Minsoo muses. "Losing your sense of smell. Can be treated in some cases, but since it was provoked by something arcanic here, it may be different."

"We'll find a solution," Namjoon assures and squeezes Yoongi's shoulder.

"Plus you said your gift was given from the hummingbird as well, so it must have a good aspect," Jungkook tries to reason but Taehyung can tell it's fruitless.

"Which one?" Yoongi snaps with a derisive laugh. "It's like I'm back in that fucking basement. I can't smell nature anymore. Fuck."

Taehyung catches onto the quivers in Yoongi's limbs. He relates to the fear and glaze that clouds Yoongi's gaze, whose mind must be haunted by the past. "You're free. You're outside," Taehyung says. Yoongi's misty eyes drift on him. "You're not down there again. You can't smell the flowers, but you can still see and feel them. Nature surrounds you in more than one sense."

Yoongi averts his gaze, but he bobs his head seconds later.

Jimin sprawls a hand on Yoongi's back. "We'll find a way."

"Yeah," Yoongi says, then falls quiet, his attention evidently elsewhere.

"What a way to bring down the mood… My turn!" Yumi leaves her lizard on top of her boulder familiar before she begins to skip toward the dragon statue. Once inside the mouth, she leans down and waves at the group.

Taehyung has half a mind to flip her the bird.

Yumi disappears inside the mouth.

It's silent for a while.

Several more minutes pass without any sign from her.

"Did she actually die?" Jungkook wonders, perhaps too happily.

Dahee speaks a word.

"Fierce Dragon said 'hopefully'. Revna hopes so too."

"Don't be like that."

"He says with a smile," Taehyung notes.

"First of all," Jungkook starts, "I—"

An agonizing scream rips through the silence.

Yumi staggers backward at the top of the statue then falls down on the tongue. She turns to stand on her hands and knees, and terror paints her face as her cry continues to tear out of her mouth. She grips onto the side of her face, her nails biting at the skin and drawing blood between her fingers.

She seemingly passes out moments later.

The rock familiar flies up to her. It somehow manages to prop Yumi atop of it, carrying her to the ground.

Yumi is unconscious and immobile.

Taehyung wonders if she's died when her chest doesn't move. He's about to check her vitals when her head springs upright with a gasp.

Yumi topples down the side of her familiar. She shakily stands. Her eyes are wide open. Not a single blink tears through her stupor as she stares ahead without budging.

"The hell happened to you?" Minsoo curses but Yumi doesn't respond. She doesn't even blink when Jimin waves a hand in front of her.

"I think we can exit Kaiya and leave her here," Namjoon suggests with a tight-lipped smile.

"Oh…" A shiver runs through Yumi's body. "I see."

She looks the most shaken Taehyung has ever seen her, and his wariness flares, laced with interest. “Which bird?”

“Crow.” The lizard climbs up Yumi's shoulder and touches her ear, its mouth opened. Hoseok, Jimin and Woobin startle when she claps her hands once. “Wheew!” She shakes her head. “That was unpleasant.”

“ *What* was,” Yoongi warily asks.

“Dying.”

A collective *‘Huh ’* trails after Yumi’s confession.

“It appears my gift allows me to experience intimate deaths,” Yumi explains.

“Intimate?” Taehyung and Jungkook both say unison.

Yumi smiles but it does not reach her eyes. “Well, as fun as this trip has been, and as much as I have learned and seen, I would love to get back home as soon as possible.”

Taehyung wants to push and ask more, but he knows it won’t be met with any answer. “Has everyone gotten their gift?”

A chorus of *‘Yes’* answers him.

“Revna too! And now Revna can talk to Taetae, heh.”

Taehyung pats Revna’s head who flicks her tongue at him in a peck. “We should leave, if so. I was hoping to receive another pomegranate.”

“Perhaps it will be the case for your next visit. But as I said, you must wait several days before coming here again,” Cahira warns. “Kaiya is demanding on the living.”

Taehyung nods.

“Is there nothing else you can tell us about nixes, Cahira?” Jungkook asks. “Revna has been eating the raven bell out of nowhere, however eating it gives her nightmares. Now Taehyung is also coughing them up.”

“As you must already know, most nixes’ bells have healing properties, or properties that can be used in medicine. I assume it’s the same in some ways for the raven nix, and that it must have some kind of healing effect on those two.” She points at Taehyung and Revna.

“Taehyung’s arcane has been heavily depleted. Maybe this is why,” Jungkook thinks to himself. “But what about Revna’s nightmares?”

“How do you know they’re nightmares only,” Cahira retorts.

“What do you mean?”

“They could be memories.”

Taehyung’s eyes widen. “Why do you think that?”

“Basilisks retain traces of who they once were. They were living people, however cursed to this form, their arcane sealed or altered. Their memories can still exist, but the curse is so invasive and… destructive that it tends to wipe out their memories in the same process, while still allowing them to carry some of their personality, for the luckiest,” Cahira explains. “In the case of Woosung’s daughter, he had told us back then that nearly all of her memories had been erased, aside from a few.”

“She doesn’t recall how she got cursed? Nor by who?”

“Not at all.” Cahira turns toward Revna as she distractedly braids her hair. “What have you been seeing in your nightmares?”

“Lots of blood. And a gray mist. And I feel a lot of pain too. Lots of it. Revna is very lonely too in the nightmares. It’s scary. But the nix tastes* really *good.”

“Nixes could heal memories?” Minsoo mulls over. “It *would* be a difficult thing to ascertain, and it would explain why no one has ever found out what the raven bell can do. It’s not every day that one has to heal memories.”

“You should visit Woosung’s daughter,” Cahira suggests. “Have her consume raven nixes, and see if it has the same effect on her as it does on your basilisk.”

“That doesn’t explain why I’m puking them out. I don’t have any memories to heal,” Taehyung protests.

“It might be related to Dohyun for you,” Jungkook notes. “You told me yourself that there are quite a few things you don’t remember from when you were with him.”

“I suppose,” Taehyung hums then winces. “I don’t want to remember any of that shit.”

“Let us hope you do not, Son,” Dahee says and gently brushes the scars on his shoulder blades.

“If the raven nix doesn’t heal memories, then finding out what they do will be tricky. All that I can confirm about nixes is what you already know, and the fact that they are very, *very* ancient, rare plants. Nixes’ origin is quite obscure and has always been, even in my time. They only grow on dragonborn lands and prosper during winter, yet wither once spring arrives. They simply… appeared on a shore, one day.”

“A shore?”

“A the south, yes. But that is all I know.”

“Can’t believe this reptile is now barfing them,” Yoongi says.

“Fuck you,” Taehyung counters without an ounce of actual anger, but it draws a small smile from the warlock.

“Which is very odd,” Cahira hums, unnervingly staring at Taehyung. “What is your plan for the spring pulse of the plague? I would like to aid, as it is important for Kaiya and I to find a cure or shield from it.”

“Survive it is the plan for now,” Elder Miseon sighs. “We won’t be able to put a stop to the spring pulse.”

“But you could try to use it in some ways.” Cahira’s gaze darts between Taehyung and Jungkook. “I haven’t forgotten about this dragon soul you’ve spoken of. If they are dying from the plague, and if they survive the spring pulse, we should find a way to communicate with them.”

“It would be the closest hint we have toward elucidating the plague,” Elder Miseon nods.

“Why do you keep referring to the plague as a pulse?” Woobin questions.

“Because it thrums like a heart. It pulses out the plague, and the plague draws in something in return, perhaps souls, if we are to believe Jungkook’s theory,” Elder Miseon answers.

“My apologies for not being more helpful in this matter.” Cahira lowers her head, her shoulders tightly withdrawing. “I wish to have this tragedy solved as promptly as you do.”

“We will eventually,” Taehyung assures.

Cahira nods. “If that will be all.” She snaps her fingers.

The field, sky and dragon statue all begin to cloud as a white mist takes over the area.

It leaves place to the field of white spider-lilies that the group had stepped on before entering Kaiya.

“You may leave,” Cahira announces.

“Just like that? Is it really safe? Are we really out?" Namjoon’s head darts around while he clutches his gift to his chest. "What if we forgot something. I feel like we forgot something.”

Dahee bows before Cahira as she speaks.

Taehyung peers at Revna.

“Fierce Dragon is saying* ‘Thank you for welcoming us within your home’. *The house was so pretty, Taetae. The glass was so colorful! When Revna has hands like Kookie and Taetae, Revna wants to paint glass to— Oh Fierce Dragon is also saying* ‘I hope to see you soon again, this time with more answers.’ *” Revna’s head turns toward Jungkook. ***“Revna don’t want to go back to Kaiya, Kookie.”***

Jungkook chuckles. “Then you won’t.”

Cahira waves a dismissive hand at Dahee. “Before you leave. You.” She makes a beckoning motion at Taehyung. “Come with.”

Taehyung quirks a brow. “Sure.”

Jungkook surveys Taehyung who walks away from the group to privately discuss with Cahira.

Cahira's back is to Jungkook, and she must talk because Taehyung nods. Taehyung looks unreadable, a carefully crafted mask of indifference plastered on his face. However Jungkook catches onto the way the muscles of Taehyung's jaw shift.

Another nod from Taehyung later, Cahira fades away from the field in a whirlwind of white spider-lilies' petals that curl around her before dispersing in the blue sky.

Taehyung joins the group to curious gazes.

"All good?" Jimin asks.

"Yeah." Is all that Taehyung says.

Jungkook walks up to him and whispers in his ear "Secret?" Taehyung nods once more. "Alright."

"That was one hell of a trip," Hoseok grunts.

Everyone discusses the journey to Kaiya together.

Jungkook doesn't participate in the conversation as he remains far from the group.

His mind drifts away.

"You've noticed."

Jungkook peers at Dahee on his left, whose gift has temporarily worn off, the sand of the hourglass-like object she holds falling into the lower glass bulb. Jungkook supposed that she will be forced to be speak in Draconian only once the bulb is filled.

"Taehyung is hiding something. My father as well."

"From both of us."

"From *all* of us." Dahee's jaw clenches, warmth emanating from her. "While I had been keeping my own secrets, the one Taehyung is hiding with my father concerns me. I believe Minsoo knows, and that it is related to him, Taehyung, or both of them."

Jungkook hesitates for a moment before saying "Do you think Minsoo has the plague?"

The anger in Dahee's gaze vanishes. Her eyes lower. "It has been a tormenting thought, but I'm not certain. I can't tell for how long this has been going on, however I have caught my father drinking from a vial."

"What about Taehyung? I remember him coughing and having a sore throat at some point."

"As grim as it will sound, if it had been due to the plague, my son would have died already. My father too. Weeks have passed since Taehyung had felt like this, and it has stopped now. But…" Dahee meets Jungkook's gaze. "What had happened at the manor had been dire. I worry it may have left lingering effects on his arcane and breath pouch."

"It has been depleted."

“Yes, and it has reached that point too often in too little time. A dragonborn’s arcane isn’t supposed to ever be depleted, and yet—” Dahee exhales. “He had to use his hemomancy after over a decade of not doing so, only to have it be sealed afterwards. These are too many erratic changes to his arcanes, it’s no wonder he is exhausted, and that it may have had an incurable effect on him. I worry about you too.”

Jungkook makes a noncommittal sound of surprise. “Uh?”

“My dear, you have helped thousands of souls pass and find their freedom, I worry of what impact it may have had on your necromancy, but also on yourself,” Dahee says with a gentle smile. “I am also concerned about this soul, or blue liquid you have drunk. We do not know what it is, nor if it may have nefarious consequences on you.”

“Oh… That’s…” Jungkook ducks his head to hide his smile. “Thank you. For worrying. Which is probably a weird thing to thank you for.”

“We care about you, Jungkook.”

Dahee interlaces her fingers with Jungkook’s. Her hand is warm. It’s callused yet soft, but it cradles Jungkook’s hand in a way that is different from Taehyung, yet equally comforting and secure.

“We will investigate your gift and make sure that it is safe for you,” Dahee assures. She squeezes Jungkook’s hand.

“I know it’s safe. I could feel it.”

“Perhaps, however, you cannot summon your necromancy anymore. You may have depleted your own arcane, even if I have heard that it is not possible for warlocks. It is worrisome nonetheless. Do not contest,” Dahee chides with a click of her tongue when Jungkook opens his mouth to protest.

Jungkook snorts. “Fine, fine. We’ll figure out what is happening to my arcane as well.”

“We will. You matter too.”

Jungkook smiles as he closes his eyes and breathes in the lighter air now that they’re outside of Kaiya. He tries to call forth his flames and tattoos, however neither ever manifests itself. When he opens his eyes, the world hasn’t lost its colors.

He can still feel his necromancy, a small little thing somewhere deep within him, but it seems dormant, for lack of a better word.

“Let’s fly home. We all need rest.”

Dohyun steps out of the carriage.

He breathes in, enjoying the warmth of the sun on him. Wind ruffles his coat, the sleeve of his missing arm snapping in the air. He observes the sight before him.

“Uncanny.”

“And dull,” Hajoon notes. “I was expecting it to be a lot more thrilling.”

“It will be,” someone says as they step out of their own carriage, followed by a dozen more people, all warlocks and dragonborns Dohyun has worked with. “A pleasure to see you again, Dohyun.”

“Likewise,” Dohyun nods. “Where is our guide?”

A dragonborn steps out last from the carriage. The man is not accompanied, for once, and as per Dohyun’s instructions.

Dohyun’s lips curl around a smile. “Woosung, I wasn’t certain you’d join us.”

Woosung looks around, his shoulders tense. “Neither was I.”

“I’m relieved to know you have seen reason.” Dohyun discreetly gestures at Hajoon, and the latter understands the quiet demand to keep an eye on Woosung. “I do not wish any harm to dragonborns. Far from it.”

“The wings you have torn from Taehyung’s back tell me another tale,” Woosung retorts.

Mindless, ignorant vermin.

Like everyone else.

“I don’t expect for anyone other than my dove and I to comprehend the bond that unites us,” Dohyun dismisses. “Shall we?”

The group gathers.

The ritual is fairly simple. Dohyun uses the hand he has left. Blood seeps from the wound, embellishing white.

“May winter bloom.”

Chapter End Notes

> The whole scene at the pit with Kaiya was so DIFFICULT to write, I had all the visuals in mind, I knew what was happening and what it looked like, but writing it down into words in a way that is understandable was sooo difficult, I really hope it was alright T____T It took me so long to write this whole scene y'all it was genuinely the most difficult scene I've had to work on jhbsajb
>
> Other than that, I loved writing this chapter so muuuch!! The scene toward the end where Koo frees the souls and Taekook conv after was one my fav to write jhahbsa Shit will start to go down though so buckle up, what Taehyung is hiding will be revealed very soon 👁️👄👁️ Do you perhaps have some theories about what it's about? 👀

I'll see you soon for CH29!!

I will soon be introducing a new side (very, very side, temporary character) that I believe y'all will enjoy to see for what they will provoke by simply existing XDDD

Love y'all and thank you so much again for your patience and lovely comments 🥹 Forehead kisses to you 🤍

— Chapter's visuals —

Twitter thread of this chapter's visuals: CH28

Cahira's hair
The letter
Donovan's flower
Doodles of the pit + Kaiya + the scene between Jungkook and Kaiya + Of Jungkook and Kaiya in the field of spider-lilies + statue of exchange + spider-lilies' photosynthesis
Hoseok, Junhyun and Namjoon's gifts

🎁 Lovely gift time made by SLB lovely readers💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook and the goblet made by sunkjjk

Chapter 29: Pandora's Box

Chapter Summary

Pandora's Box was opened, woven with sorrow and instability. Only hope is left now.

Chapter Notes

We back, baby, enjoy ✨ Tissues might be needed for this chapter 🥹🤍

Smol song recs, I highly recommend to at least listen to the song at 5) while reading the scene that happens!!

1) Starting with Max Richter - She Remembers (Soft Sounds) until *"Jungkook is emboldened by the view."*

2) Then Gibran Alcocer - Solas (Cover) until the end of that scene

3) Then Beautiful Relaxing Music - Coffee Music, Sleep Music, Cappuccino until *"...not without one last peck on the cheek of a grumbling dragonborn."*

4) You can put DEVIANT || Dark Ambient Music to develop your shadow for the scene with the new pov

5) THEN, when you see the line *"Jungkook doesn't understand at first."*, switch to Ludovico Einaudi - Experience (Official Visualizer) until the end of that scene

🎁 Lovely gift time made my SLB lovely readers Part I💛🎁
(second part in the end notes because the links/formatting exceeds the max characters T___T)

❧ Art of Taehyung from the memories he showed to Jungkook in CH14 (cw // for slight blood!!) made by riveranil211920
❧ Art of Taehyung's dragon form made by _yourosewei_

❧ Drabble about Taekook and lingerie written by luna140199
❧ Drabble with sulky Jungkook and whipped Taehyung written by palletaegoo

❧ Art of Yoongi and his ravens made by @taeoceans

Liv made a HUGE project where she drew every single out fit Taehyung and Jungkook wore for the wedding with lil additions of chibi tae or koo T___T Please give it a lot of love 🤲🤍

❧ Day 1: Taehyung in his 1st outfit made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 2: Jungkook in his 1st outfit made by _yourosewei_
❧ Day 3: Taehyung in his 2nd outfit + headpiece made by _yourosewei_

- Day 4: Jungkook in his 2nd outfit + headpiece made by _yourosewei_
- Day 5: Taehyung in his 3rd outfit made by _yourosewei_
- Day 6: Jungkook in his 3rd outfit made by _yourosewei_
- Compilation of the 6 days made by _yourosewei_
- Day 7: Taekook's wedding kiss made by _yourosewei_

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung loves to tease, Jungkook has come to know and love.

What he especially enjoys is to do or say something that will prompt an affronted *'Taehyung!'* out of Jungkook, akin to now where he utters "I probably have blood between my asscheeks."

"Taehyung!"

Taehyung snickers to himself as he opens the door to their house and steps inside, carrying a couple chests brimming with gold coins and precious gems for trading.

Jungkook trails after him, not without smacking Taehyung with the heap of letters they had also retrieved from the postal hut. He takes off his shoes and winces when he removes his socks stiff with dry blood.

"You don't?"

"That is *not* the question."

"I need a shower. I need ten showers. Maybe even twenty. So damn annoying that we couldn't find any river to clean ourselves," Taehyung grumbles. "Could have used my mom's fire and Woobin's ice if this dumbass hadn't exhausted his breath pouch tinkering with his gift."

"Does Revna have blood between asscheeks?"

Taehyung freezes.

Jungkook gawks at Revna. His gaze then slowly drifts on Taehyung where it bores. "This is what you're teaching her."

Taehyung raises his hands. "Listen—"

"*Fix this.*"

"Right away."

Jungkook marches up the stairs, smiling to himself while he listens to Taehyung berating Revna about *'proper vocabulary'* for a *'little girl who is too young to be cursing'*. Revna doesn't take kindly to it, and her whining is effective in shushing Taehyung's scolding who soon gushes about how delighted he is to be able to converse with her.

Jungkook enters the bathroom and halts in front of the mirror.

There isn’t a single patch of his skin that is not covered in blood. Yet, in spite of the gruesome sight he must have made back in Kaiya, the way Taehyung had looked at him had been laced with so much devoted awe.

Jungkook had felt *venerated.*

"God…"

Jungkook splashes cold water on his face to forsake the thought and abate the flush heating his cheeks. He then tries to clean the blood on his neck with warmer water, but the process is tedious, and he's still exhausted and sore from the trip.

“Rev went out for a bit,” Taehyung announces as he enters the bathroom. “I think she was feeling a tad stuffy after Kaiya.”

“Probably, yes. She didn’t like this place at all.” Jungkook tuts when the dried blood he attempts to scrape off his forearms remains.

Taehyung props himself on the sink counter. “Did she go through a night terror?”

“I don’t know. She was really quiet after them though, so perhaps? She evidently didn’t want to talk about it, but we should try again later.”

Taehyung reclines against the wall and long mirror.

Jungkook pretends to not notice Taehyung’s quiet attention hooked on him. However as the silence grows, and when Taehyung’s gaze still does not flit away, Jungkook shuffles on his spot, concealing more of his face in the sink. “What?”

“What you’ve done in the field…”

Jungkook waits.

He’s not sure for what.

Perhaps a belated remark, a quip, or a snide denial of all that has led to the moment with the spider-lilies. Maybe Taehyung regrets eati—

“I’m proud of you.”

Jungkook stills.

“I don’t know if it means anything from me, but you’ve done so well there, from the entrance, to Kaiya, to meeting Donovan and Cahira, then in the field… You freed so many souls, helped them pass on, and I don’t think you realize how out of this world this is. You should be proud of yourself too.”

Jungkook’s lips part open only to close again. He can count on one hand how often he has heard those words addressed to him. His gaze finds Taehyung’s, the latter honest and full of a pride that isn’t aimed inward.

“You’re proud of me?”

Taehyung averts his gaze and snorts, inelegant. *Endearing,* accompanied with a half smile. “Who wouldn’t be? You should have seen yourself.”

“I just— Yumi’s lizard helped me. If it wasn’t for it, I may very well have drowned in that lake and —”

“The lizard helped you listen to the souls? Being an ear, voice and vessel for their anguish? Was it an aid in understanding Kaiya? Or when you granted freedom to the trapped souls?”

Jungkook is the one to avoid Taehyung’s eyes when they drift back on him.

“I’m asking. Was it or not?” Taehyung gently presses. Jungkook shakes his head. “Exactly. I know you said the lizard ate your flames and whatnot, but at the end of the day, it was all you.”

“Still—”

“Still nothing. You bring so much peace to those around, Jungkook,” Taehyung rasps and the edge in his tone softens. “Why don’t you do the same for yourself, hm?”

Arms crossed on the edge of the sink, Jungkook rests his forehead against them. “Okay… Thank you…”

“I thought you wanted to hear that kind of stuff more often from me, so why are you contesting so much now that I say them, uh?”

Jungkook purses his lips. “‘Cause I wasn’t expecting you to actually live up to it.”

“Underestimating me, Viper?”

“Is it underestimating considering your proclivities in being emotionally uptight?”

“Fuck off, Prince. *‘Proclivities’* ,” Taehyung mimics in a posh accent.

Jungkook flicks some water at him before returning to his task. “Why are you still staring at me?” He wonders when after a few additional minutes have passed.

“Curiosity.” Taehyung jumps off the counter. “I’m gonna grab a stash of washcloths and towels. We’ll need a lot.”

Jungkook nods. His hands still when a third appears in the corner of his eyes, trailed by an arm that is braced atop the sink. His head turns. Taehyung's face is closer than he had anticipated. The gaze, however, is cast down on Jungkook's neck.

"Does it hurt?" Taehyung wonders. 'It' is the faint cut at the curve of Jungkook's throat, but also the two faint, punctured wounds there. 'It' is caressed by a finger, then a thumb that presses, as though trying to draw a drop of blood from the bruises.

"It doesn't, but I wonder if they'll leave scars."

Taehyung's eyes snap to Jungkook's. "Would you want them to?"

"They wouldn't be marks that would fade away after a few days, would they?" Jungkook watches how a hazy band of gold adorns Taehyung's content gaze.

Taehyung stares at the reddened marks on Jungkook's throat, the muscles of his jaws shifting.

His teeth must be aching, Jungkook internally smiles.

"We'll see," is all that Taehyung says before vacating the bathroom.

It’s only once certain that the dragonborn cannot hear him that Jungkook heaves a deep sigh and lowers to a crouch.

Jungkook has had an inkling for some time now of what kind of sentiments he harbors for the gruff, oblivious — *so lovely* — dragonborn, but he had put these at the back of his mind as they had no place to be.

However since he and Taehyung have eaten the pomegranate, after being hit by how all-consuming his feelings are growing to be for the man, Jungkook does not believe that he can ignore them any longer, nor pretend that they do not exist, especially when there’s this flicker of hope that Taehyung may be sharing a similar affection, and that he would come to know it eventually.

Jungkook really, *really* hopes that is the case.

"I believe I may desire the impossible."

"It's still yours to have."

“Catch me. I want you to catch me. No matter when I fall. No matter how I fall. No matter why I fall. I want to be caught by you, and only you."

Jungkook internally yells at himself for his boldness. And his obviousness too, perhaps. However he can’t help it when Taehyung indulges him every single time. It feels too good to allow himself to experience something he has never known before, to be finally free to do as he pleases.

“You can take anything you want from me.”

"Do you want to taste yourself?"

"I feel weird, like something's gonna—"

"You set me alight."

"Tae… There. I like it there. "

"Shut up!"

"What?!" Taehyung yells from downstairs.

Maybe Jungkook should drown himself in the sink. It sounds like a wonderful idea at the moment. "What was wrong with me? What *is* wrong with me? Oh my God…"

But it's not entirely his fault that he has *moaned* Taehyung's name and begged for more, right?

"Right," he agrees with himself. "It's 'cause of the pomegranate. I was drunk. And high. And—"

And riddled with so much pleasure. Enough to put to shame any solitary pleasure Jungkook may have indulged himself into. Not that he and Taehyung had…

Had se—

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up." Jungkook springs up to his feet and splashes his flaming face with some more water.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing!"

“And I don’t think that’s gonna help at all." Taehyung drops a metal bucket on the floor. “You can throw your clothes in the bucket. We’ll just burn them. It’d be a pain in the ass to clean the blood.”

Jungkook glowers at Taehyung. “Have you gone mad?”

“What?”

“I’m not throwing away your gift. The rest can go but not the jacket.”

“Don’t come whine to me when you’ll still be cleaning it an hour later,” Taehyung warns and steps behind Jungkook who straightens up. He begins to unfasten the clasps and buckles at the back, grumbling under his breath as he does so.

In the meantime, Jungkook removes and cleans his jewelry one by one, carefully scraping off the blood from them. He’s not very good at his job, partially due to the fact that his eyes are settled on Taehyung’s face in the mirror. Taehyung’s lips are covered in blood too.

“You’re the one who’s staring now.”

Jungkook startles.

His gaze lowers, flustered. An itch dances across his skin that heightens the more Taehyung’s fingers are closer to touching the bare skin. Taehyung is barely a foot away from Jungkook, yet it does not feel quite close enough, physical enough, *intimate* enough.

“Taehyung?”

“Hm?”

Jungkook fiddles with his wedding ring.

“Tell me.”

Jungkook glances at Taehyung in the mirror. He turns his head to properly find Taehyung's curious gaze. "We really need to shower, but… I'm too lazy to do it alone. I know it'll be annoying." He halts there, never quite asking for what he wants.

Thankfully, he does not need to.

"Want to shower together?"

Jungkook pivots to face the sink again. He nods once.

"Sure," Taehyung agrees, to Jungkook's delight. "Was thinking the same, actually. There's no way we'll be able to clean our back on our own."

A silence falls between them afterwards.

Taehyung is done with unbuckling Jungkook's jacket that he also helps slide off and put aside. He's the first one to undress and turn on the shower, steam soon filling the room with its warmth.

It's only once Taehyung is naked under one of the two shower heads that Jungkook also removes his garments, a lingering awkwardness hastening his movements. He shuffles on Taehyung's right to the other shower head. He sighs to himself when the warm water cascades down his sore limbs.

"It's fucking everywhere," Taehyung groans as he scrubs his face.

Jungkook grabs a washcloth to start cleaning himself, his hands and arms first, then his face. His hair is next, full of gunk and blood that he tries to rinse as much as possible for now.

Taehyung curses again an hour or so later.

"This is disgusting."

Jungkook chuckles.

"Is it funny, Viper?"

"Very," Jungkook answers. Taehyung's nonchalance has been a remedy to Jungkook's coyness. "Do you want me to do your back now?"

"Yeah," Taehyung says after a beat. He turns around.

Jungkook doesn't want to glance. It's unbecoming of Amaris' Prince and future heir to the throne.

His gaze darts down nonetheless.

Taehyung appears to be well-built… everywhere, which is not a surprise, yet it still leaves Jungkook all flushed and flustered.

Jungkook coughs to hide his shame.

He begins to pass a washcloth over Taehyung's shoulders, removing the blood from the skin. He's careful when he reaches the scars. "Are they alright?"

"The usual."

Jungkook momentarily forsakes his tool to have his fingers clean the specks on the ragged and puffy edges of the scars instead. He smiles to himself when he can feel and see the goosebumps that start pebbling the skin of Taehyung's neck. He hesitates when his fingers drag low on Taehyung's spine, but he decides to pass a cloth at the dimples there anyway. Taehyung doesn't seem to mind, too busy huffing and puffing about the blood.

"No need to do my hair, I'll do it myself," Taehyung says when Jungkook makes a move to wash them.

"Why not?" Jungkook turns around at a gentle push of hands on his barren hips.

Taehyung is quiet for a moment, washing Jungkook's back. "When I was with him, sometimes the pain and everything else was so debilitating that I… I couldn't move. Or think. At all. Was just absent. So he'd wash me. And he'd spend a lot of time on my hair."

Jungkook turns to survey Taehyung. "Did you hate it?"

"I wanted to." Taehyung shrugs. "At the time it was misplaced comfort? He was the one hurting me, but also the one making the pain better and taking care of me."

"He wasn't taking care of you, Taehyung."

"That's the thing about him. He's contradictory. You and everyone else can deny it all you want, but he does love me."

"This kind of love isn't supposed to be painful."

"Is it not? It can be when you're upset that this person's attention and affection is given to someone else. Or maybe they don't fulfill your wants and needs. Maybe the pain happens because you're hit by how you can't live without them, no matter how hard you try to," Taehyung quietly continues. "Love is inherently painful. You simply choose whether or not the one you love is worth it."

Jungkook wants to deny it all, but he can't bring himself to lie.

"What if the person you love dies? Wouldn't you be in pain?"

"Of course, but it'd be worth it. Love is more than that."

"What else is it, if so?"

"It's waking up in the morning knowing that they're by your side, warm and keeping you safe. It's being certain that no matter what happens, you'll never be alone anymore. You'll always have them with you. It's finding a home in someone and it's… It's overcoming hardships together and—" Jungkook pauses. "It's unbound devotion and love, both selfish and selfless. Don't you find this worth the pain?"

Taehyung's gaze is unreadable. His head tilts as he stares at Jungkook, then he casts his eyes down. "When you put it like that… It does sound quite lovely."

"I—I mean. That's what I believe, at least. I wouldn't know." A lie. "I've never been in love before." Another newfound lie.

Taehyung huffs. "I wouldn't know either. I'm just a pessimist when it comes to this."

"You don't say," Jungkook playfully jests. "Do you really think being in love isn't worth it?"

"I don't know. I can't fall in love anyway, so it doesn’t matter."

"Are you sure you can't?" Jungkook asks in a rasp, chewed so low that he's not certain Taehyung has heard him.

"Sounds hellish," Taehyung says as a joke, but Jungkook can't find it in himself to be amused.

"But it's worth it."

"How can you be so convinced it is if you've never been in love?"

Because you're worth it.

"I just am. I think falling in love is breathtaking, in every meaning of the word."

Taehyung scrubs the cloth along Jungkook's spine in small circles. “If I ever fall in love one day," Taehyung starts and Jungkook's heart stutters where this bud of hope blossoms, "you'll have to be there because I'll certainly need to whine about it."

Jungkook bursts into laughter. It sounds both pained and relieved, an echo to the hope that is kept alive by every thread of affection Taehyung sews within Jungkook. “I can’t wait.” He doesn’t mention how literal he means this.

Jungkook opts to drive the topic into safer waters. "Are you really okay with showering with me?"

“I’ve never liked showering or bathing with people, even before him. I hate showering in general, I’m not sure why. Being naked and wet and cold is…” Taehyung grunts. “But I don’t mind it with you.”

“Sure?”

“Wouldn’t have agreed to this otherwise, Viper. And… I like this. With you.”

“This?” Jungkook makes a move to turn his head, however Taehyung promptly has him face forward before Jungkook can glance at his face.

“Doing this."

Jungkook bites back a smile. “What does ‘this’ entai—” Jungkook yelps when Taehyung uses the cloth to smack his hip. “You mean washing me, right? I need clarifications.”

“ *Viper.* You’re pissing me off.” Taehyung wipes Jungkook’s nape. “But yes," he mumbles next.

“You like touching me.” Jungkook doesn’t bother phrasing it as a question, half because he doesn’t want to hear a denial, half because coyness stifled the end of his sentence.

“I suppose I do.”

A flush warms Jungkook, tender like the fingers that trace the side of his throat.

“S’nice.”

Jungkook emits a soft sound. “It is.”

“Are *you* sure about it? The showering, I mean. With Seohyung and the… The sink bullshit. I imagine that bathrooms aren’t your favorite places to be in.”

“I’ve come to learn to enjoy them.”

“That’s good.”

“Especially when with you.”

“You *are* needy when it comes to hair washing. Or putting on your moisturizing cream. Or your face cream. Or helping you pop a pimple on your bac—”

“Shut up!"

Taehyung's snicker puffs on Jungkook's shoulder blade.

Jungkook feels close enough to Taehyung now, safe and shivering whenever Taehyung’s knuckles or nails drag across his skin, melting more and more as time elapses between them.

“How’s your necromancy?”

“Can’t feel it. It's gone.”

“Not gone. Dormant.”

Right. Taehyung *has* been adamant about that.

“I can still feel your arcane.”

“It’s odd that you do and I don’t for the most part,” Jungkook muses.

“You don’t feel off other than that?" Taehyung asks. Jungkook doesn’t respond right away, preoccupied with tilting his head to the side when Taehyung cleans his neck and shoulders. Taehyung taps his chin. “Jungkook.”

Jungkook shakes his head.

“Want to wash your hair?”

Jungkook nods. He obeys Taehyung’s request when the latter drags a wooden stool for Jungkook to sit on. Taehyung even gives a towel for Jungkook to cover his lap with and feel more comfortable. Jungkook rewards the attention with a nuzzle of Taehyung’s wrist.

The shampoo is *wonderful*.

It’s slow and lasting enough for Jungkook to doze off at some point, as he tends to do so whenever Taehyung washes his hair. Jungkook believes that it even goes on for a couple hours, and an additional one that they both spend fully cleaning themselves twice.

“I’m gonna take a bath as well to soak away what’s left of the blood, and then take one last shower,” Taehyung announces.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll—”

“You can join if you want.”

Jungkook’s gaze darts on Taehyung. “As in, inside the tub? With you?”

“No. I meant that you’ll sit at the foot of the bathtub and watch me bathe while you wait for your turn,” Taehyung retorts with a sass. Jungkook rolls his eyes. “Of course I meant in the tub, dumbass. There’s more than enough space to accommodate at least four of us.”

“Be specific next time.”

“Next time?”

Jungkook splutters. “N—Not that I’m expecting for this to happen again. Unless you want to? We’ve never bathed *together,* together. If we discard the hot spring. But this wasn’t *together,* together. There were other people, so it doesn’t count.”

Taehyung steps closer to Jungkook, a playful smile floating on his lips. His hair is slicked back, doing nothing to hide the sharp gaze he fixates Jungkook with. “And what does ‘ *together* , together’ entails?”

“Well. I…” Jungkook trails off. Taehyung is close. And naked, saved for the towel around his waist. “A bath… Together…”

“Yeah?”

Jungkook folds his hands behind his back, hoping that the heat filling his face and neck does not color it too. “I don’t know… Why are you teasing so much,” he mumbles.

“You’ve been especially easy to fluster lately. It’s funny,” Taehyung snickers and turns around to walk up to the bathtub.

It turns out that Taehyung being ‘specific’ translates into him suddenly removing his towel and flashing his derrière to Jungkook in the process, and, really, who knew hunting griffins could tone all sorts of muscles, even those one would not suspect. So Jungkook glances down. *Again.* But in his defense, it’s right there, and it disappears seconds later when Taehyung sits in the tub filled with a bubble bath.

Jungkook quickly steps in the warm water as well. He slumps down the bathtub with a happy sigh, settled opposite of Taehyung. “My whole body is a sore wound.”

“I’d be worried if it were anything else.”

Jungkook sinks lower, up until the water reaches his chin. “Everything still feels like a fevered dream.”

“Was a demented trip,” Taehyung agrees and he stretches his arms over the edge of the tub, his head reclined against a rolled up towel. His gaze drifts on Jungkook where it stays.

“What?”

“Do you regret eating the pomegranate?”

Jungkook flushes and averts his gaze. "No…"

"You don't sound very convinced... Is it because you moaned at some point?"

"You— Shut up! Shut! Up! I didn't moan!"

Taehyung's shoulders shake. "Could've fooled me."

God.

Jungkook *had* moaned.

What if… What if he had gotten a tad *too* excited? Taehyung would have felt it from how close their bodies had been, and Jungkook would have then slit his own throat.

"Stop laughing! You're obnoxious."

Taehyung's laughter heightens.

"*You* moaned."

Taehyung sobers up. "I fucking did not."

"Yes you did. *'You taste so good', 'I'll devour you whole', 'Ah… Jung—'"* Jungkook shields his face when Taehyung splashes water on him with his foot. "If you didn't moan, then neither have I."

Taehyung glowers at him. "Fine."

"Fine."

Jungkook ducks his head to conceal his smile. "Do you regret it?"

“No.”

The relief is immediate, draping heavily over Jungkook’s form. "I'm glad."

Taehyung makes a noise, neither in denial nor confirmation. However he heaves a long, forlorn sigh afterwards. His lids fall shut. “What am I supposed to do now…"

“Uh?”

“I’ve tasted a fare you can’t give me anymore.”

Jungkook barks out a delighted laugh that he doesn’t have the time to muffle. “I’m sure you’ll be able to eat it again whenever my necromancy isn’t dormant anymore. Was it that good?”

Taehyung’s eyes open, his gaze lidded with sleepiness. “The best thing I ever ate.”

“M’sure you’ll get to have some more again soon," Jungkook flushes.

“Hopefully. Otherwise I might die.”

Jungkook's smile lowers when his thoughts trace back to something Taehyung had said. “When will you tell me about what's going on?”

Taehyung tenses up, as expected. He sits up straight. “I think… I think when everyone else is around.” He shuffles on his spot when Jungkook's gaze hardens.

“I’m being patient, Taehyung.”

“I know. I know, Viper...”

“Good.” Jungkook drifts in the bathtub to lean forward against its side, facing the rest of the bathroom. He pulls forward a stool where he had left the pile of letters.

“You’ll be allowed to punch me when you know.”

Jungkook pensively hums. “I’ll take you up on that.”

Taehyung’s shoulders are still drawn tight, but they loosen up when Jungkook smiles at him.

Jungkook chuckles to himself.

His husband is so simple to read and please.

Jungkook begins to skim the letters one after another. None of them are really interesting, most relating impersonal news from the Citadel, but not much from Amaris’ people. He makes a noncommittal sound of surprise when an envelope catches his attention: it’s of a pristine beige, peppered with carefully designed patterns made from gold leaves.

He tears the red wax seal and takes out the letter.

Or rather, an invitation.

“I forgot about that.”

“About what?”

“There’s an annual ball and feast where leaders of other human nations along with important figures meet together,” Jungkook explains. “Seohyung sent me the invite.”

“As if. It's bait.”

Jungkook deadpans Taehyung. “I’ve always participated in it. Every year. It’s a good way to maintain and form new business relationships, especially with importation and exportation of products. My presence is requested, as it always was.”

“You’re not going.”

“And you get to decide because…?”

“I’m your husband.”

“And?”

“And you’re not going.”

Jungkook rolls his eyes. “I have to. It’s important.”

“Y—”

“Plus we wanted to visit Seohyung, right? We’d be killing two birds with one stone.”

“What’s the second bird?”

“Watching you flounder like a lost fawn in a high society setting.” Jungkook laughs when Taehyung zaps his temple. “Plus I miss Amaris.”

Taehyung visibly subdues at the addition. He pushes himself forward, reducing the distance between himself and Jungkook, up until he’s sitting on Jungkook’s right. He props an arm next to Jungkook’s, the warmth his body exudes enveloping. He reads over Jungkook’s shoulder, but he doesn’t seem to be able to do so very well because he leans a little closer, enough for his chest and knee to bump Jungkook’s shoulder blade and hip.

“*‘Dear Jungkook’*,” Taehyung reads in an accurate imitation of Seohyung. “Did she even write this?”

“Probably not.”

A smile curves Taehyung’s lips that Jungkook looks away from before he does something foolish.

“Is it that important?”

“It is, so I’m going. It would be good for Vanae as well, since I know you export quite a lot.”

“We do,” Taehyung sighs. “It’s soon.”

“It’s a tad earlier this year."

“I wonder why,” Taehyung derides. “This has to be some kind of veiled bait.”

“Not necessarily, but even if it is, we still need to speak with Seohyung and inquire more about the primordial stone, the warlock she’s been working with, as well as her relationship with Yumi. I also wanted to ask Sungmin about my mother.”

Taehyung’s fingers drum on the tub. “We should bring Yoongi and Jimin with us.”

“We’ll have to see if Yoongi is feeling better by then.”

“Yeah…” Taehyung frowns. “Minsoo has been reading a lot about anosmia, if there’s a cure for it.”

“I know. I saw you ask him about it. You care about Yoongi.”

“‘Care’ is a gigantic leap.”

“You caaare,” Jungkook sing-songs and pokes Taehyung’s cheek. Taehyung gently bites the finger before flicking Jungkook’s forehead. Jungkook tuts. “You’ll come with me?”

“Obviously. You must be insane to think I’ll let you go to the other side of the continent alone.” Taehyung travels back to his previous spot in the tub, unaware of the turmoil of happiness and yearning he has elicited within Jungkook. He bends up a knee, an arm stretched.

It leaves more than enough space on Taehyung's right.

Jungkook could scoot there.

"If you want some bread, you can just take it right away."

Jungkook purses his lips. "How did you know…"

"You're tearing that letter to pieces."

Jungkook peers at the pile of tiny pieces of torn paper pooling on the stool. He drops what's left of the envelope. "May I have some loaves?"

Taehyung's laughter rings in the room. "Yes, you may."

Jungkook makes a sound — which is more of an embarrassing *giggle.* He makes his way toward Taehyung where he nestles himself against. He gingerly rests his head atop Taehyung's arm behind him, but everything feels a little too much all of a sudden, so he opts to fold his legs and wrap his arms around them, propping his chin on his knees.

It smells good, something floral from the bath, with an edge of smokiness. He can even smell something stormy, a complexity of Taehyung's scent that he couldn't pick up on as intensely prior to Kaiya. Jungkook softly breathes.

"I'm gonna nap for some time," Taehyung declares. "Pull me out of the water if I'm drowning."

"I'll think about it."

"Fucking brat."

Jungkook remains like this for a while, kept warm by the bath and Taehyung.

He's starved, however.

The deprivation takes the form of what he had tried earlier, and his head finds its place above Taehyung's shoulder. He glances to the side.

Taehyung appears asleep, hair fanned over the rolled up towel.

Jungkook is emboldened by the view.

He tucks himself closer if possible, heart heavily thudding in his chest. It's when not a hair's breadth separates Jungkook's side from Taehyung's, their hips and legs from each other, that Jungkook mollifies with a shaky sigh. His body is close to Taehyung's, touching and so very near. Taehyung's skin is soft against his own, a little silky, a little rough in some sparse spots, a lot *Taehyung.*

So much of Taehyung.

Jungkook captures all sensations: every scent, every breath they both take, so that he can preserve them in his mind forever and more.

The two of them have shared plenty of intimate lulls in time, however none have ever felt as raw and profound as now: both barren from any layer of clothes, discomfort or distrust. It is only them here. No urgency, yearn to protect, wound to care for or arcanic fruit has prompted this moment. There is nothing aside from a simple want to be near each other, breathe in the same air, bathe in the same water. Be at peace with one another.

Jungkook turns more toward Taehyung, curling his arms around Taehyung's chest that rises up and down every few seconds, their skin brushing at every exhalation. Jungkook's head slides down, enough for his ear to pick up on the sound.

Badum, badum, badum.

"Tae?"

"Yeah?"

Silence floats between them.

Then, a hand cups Jungkook's nape, and unable to voice out any gratefulness that weighs his tongue, he nods. The palm travels down Jungkook's naked shoulder. It squeezes, a gentle pressure of the fingertips that thaws into a feather-light caress. The hard edges of the tub and Taehyung's form soften.

An aching, warm bliss drowns Jungkook's veins, submerging him from head to toes.

Jungkook comes back to himself to the scent of mushrooms sizzling in a pan.

His bleary eyes open.

Taehyung is in the kitchen, his hair pulled back by a jeweled, regal headband. Jungkook smiles to himself. Taehyung's hair has grown quite a bit as well.

"Slept well?"

Jungkook nods. He takes his time to stand and leave the couch he had been laying on after their showers, his steps slow as he trudges toward Taehyung. He holds onto the hem of Taehyung's short sleeve, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What are you making?"

"A dessert with puff pastry. Dinner is done already."

Jungkook surveys the ingredients littering the kitchen island. "I've never seen you make this one."

"It's a family recipe."

"I'm gonna wait in the living room, okay?"

"Why? You don't want to see how I make it? It's pretty simple. You could learn—"

“I’m not part of your family.”

Taehyung stills. His gaze drifts on Jungkook before it lowers. “Only Jimin and I know it. My dad created it and then taught us. My mom technically knows it as well, but she’s a terrible cook and a worse baker.” He opens a jar of sugar. “Now it’s my turn to teach you.”

“It’s a family recipe," Jungkook rasps.

“Exactly, so it only makes sense for you to learn it as well, don’t you think? Past me was an idiotic asshole. Present me is still an idiotic asshole, but now you’re part of this idiotic asshole’s family. Quite the privilege, if you ask me.”

Jungkook can only grip onto Taehyung’s sleeve in response, but he lets go when he’s pulled into a tight embrace. Fingertips walk a path down his spine, leaving in their wake a sensitive trail that he melts into. He lifts his head to meet Taehyung's gaze when a hand cups his nape.

Taehyung stares back at him. He sighs, something fond and delicate, then he grazes his mouth against Jungkook’s forehead, so very tender. He steps away moments later and turns away from Jungkook with a clear of throat. “Anyway. Let me show you the recipe.”

“I’ve never learned a family recipe," Jungkook mumbles, fumbling with his fingers. "Is it okay to keep notes of it? Or do I have to keep it a secret? Maybe Junhyun isn’t okay with you teaching it to me. What if—”

“He actually wanted to teach it to you himself. He talked to me about it some time ago, but I asked to do it myself for the first recipe. Wanted it to be me,” Taehyung timidly confesses.

“Oh…”

“My dad has a whole shelf filled with a bunch of different cooking and baking recipes and whatnot. Just be aware that the moment you ask him about it, he’ll have you buy a book to note them down, then he'll talk your ear off for the next two decades at the very least. But let's start with this one first. We…”

Taehyung speaks softly as he explains the steps and instructs Jungkook on what to do. He’s gentle when he shows Jungkook how to hold the knife a certain way, or when he presents a spoon with some filling for Jungkook to try.

Jungkook tries his best to listen, however his mind is molten by every law chuckle Taehyung emits, by the way he guides Jungkook around, by how he lifts a glass of water for Jungkook to drink from, or by when he retrieves one of the hair jewelry he had made for Jungkook to pin the hair out of Jungkook's eyes.

When they eventually lay in bed that night, belly full, mind freed from any trouble for this lull in time, Taehyung cradles Jungkook against him.

Another press on his forehead, faint and aerial. Shy, almost. Trailed by a warm *‘Goodnight’*.

Jungkook dreams of the word being spoken against his lips.

The next morning, Jungkook is installed at the coffee table with Taehyung, a piece of parchment before him.

“Revna?” Taehyung calls out.

“What?” Revna answers with a certain temper that Jungkook internally snickers at.

“First of all, watch your tone, young lady,” Taehyung starts when she makes her arrival through the miniature opening carved in the entrance door, “second of all, come here.”

“Revna’s tone was good,” she announces and slithers on the table.

“No, it was not, and we need to talk.”

“Revna in trouble? Revna did nothing **and** ***didn’t eat nixes.”***

“You’re not in trouble. Yet,” Taehyung adds for some dramatics that meet their effects when Revna emits an affronted gasp.

“Taetae is mean.”

Taehyung huffs a chuckle. He places a raven nix on the table. “We want to try something, and it’s feeding you raven nixes.”

Jungkook and Taehyung had discussed this earlier this morning. They had not argued, per se, but their opinions had diverged and conflicted for a couple hours. However Taehyung had raised multiple good points, and so Jungkook had eventually agreed.

“Revna can eat nixes again?!”

“Under our supervision, yes,” Taehyung clarifies. “You’re not allowed to do so on your own, understood?”

“Yesss. Can Revna eat now?”

“You said you had nightmares after eating some, right?” Jungkook inquires. “Were the nightmares familiar, Lovely? Did they feel like something you’ve seen before?”

Revna hums. ***“Revna don’t know…”***

“We’ll see after you’ve eaten more, then. Are you okay with doing so even if it might give you some nightmares?”

“Yes, Revna don’t mind. Revna wants to eat them again,” she says with palpable excitement.

“Go ahead.”

Revna does not need to be asked twice. She gobbles up the flower bell in one bite, undulating in happiness moments later.

“How is it?” Jungkook asks. “How do you feel?”

"It's so good Kookie! Revna feels good. And happy."

"Whenever you wake up from a nightmare, if it happens again, I want you to immediately tell Taehyung and I about it, okay?"

"Okayyy."

"We can give her one more tonight before bed," Jungkook suggests to Taehyung who nods in agreement. "That's fine with you, Lovely?"

"Yes," Revna huffs. ***"It's fine with Revna."***

"Revna. Your tone."

Revna twists her snout away from Taehyung.

"You'll stay home with someone at all times. If it's not us, you'll be with Taehyung's parents or Namjoon and Yoongi."

"Revna is sleepy."

Jungkook glances at Taehyung then at her. "Do you usually become sleepy this fast after eating some raven nixes?"

Revna nods.

"It definitely has a strong impact on her, regardless of what it is," Taehyung muses.

"I think Cahira was right. Revna may be healing memories. It would make so much sense."

"Why?"

"Revna had her memories erased at least once, probably twice. Remember the memory I showed you when we visited Amaris? The one where I was attached to a table?"

"I do," Taehyung frowns.

"The warlock's spell never hit me. It hit Revna, and after that, she had no memories about anything that had happened prior to that night. She didn't know who I was anymore, nor how she got here."

"Oh."

"I'm not sure how this mistake could happen, but she's the one to have lost her memories instead of me, but she also could not remember anything from her past even before that warlock hit her with the spell."

Taehyung throws an arm over the couch and leans closer to Jungkook, reading over what Jungkook has written on the parchment. "How so?"

"You know how I told you that Revna had been in a scroll, and that I had accidentally bled on it, which had been when she had appeared along with the ruby?" Jungkook says and Taehyung nods. "After that occurred, she had no idea of how she ended up in a scroll, and it's why I never assumed she had a life before I unsealed her. I always thought I had created her in some way."

“But you didn’t. She’s a dragonborn.”

“Exactly, so now we know she had a life before being turned into a basilisk, that she was put inside that scroll, and that it may have happened in ancient times, which is odd in itself. Although it does not explain why you coughed a raven nix.”

“Hey, Rev.” Taehyung surveys her. “What happened in Kaiya?”

“What?”

“You acted strange at some point.”

Revna is quiet. She curls into a ball on the table, her head nestled at the center.

“Lovely…” Jungkook pulls her onto his lap. Her head and bright red eyes peek out. “Did you have a Night Terror like Taehyung and I?”

“Dunno.”

Taehyung boops her snout, eliciting a snort from her. “You can tell us.”

“Revna was in the ruby, and it was raining in it, and the rain was very red.”

Jungkook and Taehyung exchange a mute conversation through a glance.

“Then Revna fell in a cavern, and Revna heard voices. The voices were really mean. And there was a mist, it was like the one in the nightmares. The cave was so dark Revna was scared. Oh but there was a hole in the ceiling, Kookie. It looked like Taetae’s eye when Taetae is a dragon. And Revna was alone. Revna was really scared. Revna was sorry but Revna don’t know why. Then Revna went sleep, sleep.”

Jungkook lifts her in his arms to hug her and peck her crown. “That sounds really scary. You were really brave, Lovely.”

“That’s true, Revna was,” she agrees with a cute, proud nod. ***“Revna don’t like Kaiya because Kaiya don’t like Revna.”***

“Has Kaiya felt familiar?”

“Yes.”

“We won’t take you there again,” Taehyung assures.

"Can Revna sleep? Really sleepy.”

“Yeah, come on.” Taehyung takes her and rises to his feet. Jungkook does too and he grabs the large pillow Revna loves to nap on to place it in front of the fireplace. Taehyung deposits her there and covers her with a blanket, now a hidden heap under the comforter.

“Is it fine if I leave her with you? I wanted to check up on Yoongi today.”

“I’ll stay here and probably nap too,” Taehyung yawns and trudges to the couch where he plops down.

Jungkook makes a move to leave.

“Wait. C’mere.”

There’s a somersault in Jungkook’s chest at the demand. He listens to the pull tugging his feet toward Taehyung. He sits down on the edge of the couch, and a noncommittal sound slips past his lips when Taehyung’s hand cups the back of his head then brings their faces close.

Taehyung’s nose and lips rub on Jungkook’s neck and throat, leaving a trail of smoky storm behind. He lets go then turns on his side. “Alright, you can leave now.”

Jungkook pouts. He smacks Taehyung’s arm before standing. “See you later, prick.”

“Be careful.”

“Yes, yes.”

“When will you be back?”

“Probably tonight? I don’t think I’ll be there for dinner, so don’t wait for me.”

Taehyung throws a thumbs up then pulls a blanket over himself.

Jungkook walks up the stairs to prepare himself.

Half an hour later and ready to leave, Taehyung’s winter cloak draped over his shoulder, Jungkook smiles at Taehyung’s sleeping form. He follows the pull again. His fingers card through Taehyung’s soft locks, his thumb tracing a path down the back of the ear, then at the angle of the jaw. He presses a tender kiss on the apple of Taehyung’s cheek. “Goodnight,” Jungkook whispers.

“It’s 10am.”

Jungkook jerks away. “Oh my God!”

Taehyung cracks an eye open. “Creeping up on my sleep, Viper?”

“You weren’t even asleep! You’re the creep for pretending to be,” Jungkook shouts, face aflame. “Why wouldn’t you say something?”

“Was cozy. And wondering what a depraved viper would do while I’m asleep.”

“Oh my God.” Jungkook snatches the pillow Taehyung occupies to smother the dragonborn with it. “Die.”

Taehyung's shoulder shake with laughter.

Jungkook bites it.

In a deft series of movements that staggers Jungkook, he finds himself suddenly thrown on his back atop the couch. Taehyung looms over him, a hand gripping Jungkook’s wrists against his chest, the other braced next to Jungkook’s head.

Jungkook slowly inhales, engulfed by Taehyung's scent. Taehyung's face is close enough for Jungkook to catch the way the pupil thin the slightest bit. His hands lightly struggle in the clamp. A teasing test. Taehyung's fingers tighten. A playful warning.

For some uncanny reasons, Jungkook is reminded of how smoothly Taehyung had once broken Seohyung's wrist.

Taehyung huffs, the puff of air warming Jungkook's cheek. "Why do you always end up thinking about that?"

"About what?"

"How I could effortlessly take your life."

Jungkook splutters some indecipherable nonsense. "I was not—"

Taehyung tilts his head.

"I wasn't! I was reminiscing about what you did to Seohyung."

"And why were you?"

Jungkook doesn't respond.

Taehyung's smile lessens, then completely disappears. A poise drapes over his demeanor, darkening his gaze that adorn this molten gold. "Would you like it?"

"Like what?"

"Dying."

Jungkook blinks a few times. "No?"

"Then why do you enjoy the fact that you could by my hands?"

"I don't know…" Jungkook averts his gaze. The air feels hot and stuffy all of a sudden. "It's just that—" He pauses. "You could, but you won't."

"Ah… But you *do* know how awfully easy it would be for me. It's why you seem to enjoy the idea of it so much, don't you?" Taehyung releases his hold of Jungkook's wrists. His hand floats over Jungkook's throat but it skips it, instead cupping the underside of the chin.

Jungkook's breath hitches when the pressure of the thumb and index heightens around his jaw.

"One twist would be all it takes. Maybe I wouldn't even bother using my hands. A simple flick of wind would suffice. Isn't that scary?"

'Scary' wouldn't be the word Jungkook would choose to describe how he currently feels. So he shakes his head, warmth coiling in his belly.

"Why not?"

"You won't."

“Who said I won’t?”

“You when you nearly died of heartbreak because of me,” Jungkook answers, still ever so pleased by the knowledge.

Taehyung hums a low chuckle. “It happened because you were taken away from me, not because you died by my hands. There’s an important difference you’re missing here, Jungkook.”

Jungkook’s fists grip onto the cloak at the way his name curls around Taehyung's tongue.

It’s quite sickening how appealing death feels at once. He can’t help but wonder how dying from Taehyung’s hands would feel, if he were to ask him to go through with it.

Just to try.

There would be a certain sense of power, because *Jungkook* would be the one to allow the chaos dragon to do so, to summon forth those instincts Taehyung tends to repress every so often. Jungkook guesses that Taehyung would be quick about it.

Or would he?

Maybe Taehyung would take his time, savor every piece of it, relish in whatever turn Jungkook’s scent would take. It'd certainly be full of caramel, perhaps of pomegranate too.

Jungkook thinks he would hate it if Taehyung were to use anything other than his own fingers and palms. Anything else wouldn’t be good enough. It wouldn’t be Taehyung and Jungkook and *them*. Jungkook imagines that, in its own twisted way, it’d feel good to feel what he has been so closely acquainted with his whole life.

The experience would only be sweeter if given by Taehyung.

A distant contentment floods Jungkook, one that he isn’t fully certain to be his own.

“I can feel how much you’d like it… It’s all over your scent too,” Taehyung mumbles, his gaze lidded.

Jungkook’s tongue darts over his lower lip. “Can you?”

Taehyung’s answer is a palm that cradles the side of Jungkook’s throat. His gaze flits down to it. His thumb passes over the Adam’s Apple that bobs up and down. “Would you enjoy that with me only?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah? Why is that?”

Coy words tingle Jungkook’s tongue. He slides his palms along Taehyung’s navel, up to the neck that he cups. He presses down on the side, feeling the steady pulse in the veins. “Would you enjoy it too? If I were to take yours?”

“I don’t know, Viper. How would you even do it?”

“I’d carve myself through your chest.”

Taehyung’s eyes widen. Then he bursts into laughter, effectively disturbing the bubble that had wrapped around them.

“I mean it,” Jungkook mutters through pursed lips.

“I know you do.”

Jungkook makes a soft sound as he smiles. He drags his palms up and down Taehyung’s chest. He imagines himself pulling the ribcage apart to make space for himself to nestle in. He'd get to properly kiss Taehyung's heart, then. “You’d let me, right?”

“Maybe.” Taehyung grunts as he pushes himself off Jungkook. He kicks Jungkook off the couch and lays back down. “Leave me be now.”

“You’re such. A. Damn. Prick.” Jungkook punctuates each word with a smack. "I hate you."

Jungkook leaves the house, not without one last peck on the cheek of a grumbling dragonborn.

Coming here has been a mistake, Yumi belatedly realizes. However curiosity has gotten the best of her.

She *needs* to know.

She peers at the missive in her hands.

Dear Yumi,

I have delightful news to share with you, some that I believe will render you quite happy. As per usual, my aid comes with a price, one that we can discuss once you have arrived at the location written at the bottom of this letter. There will be a few safety measures beforehand, as I am sure you understand.

I expect you to keep this between you and I, of course, lest I get rid of your gift.

Yumi is starting to dislike gifts. She hasn’t been able to sleep since she had received the one from Kaiya a couple days ago. Nightmares plague her mind, whether asleep or not.

She plucks out the other content of the envelope. Her lips press into a thin line. She sighs when she caresses the strand of hair kept together by a string. The hair is coarse and dry. Old. And she lifts the bundle to bring it to her nose.

Rot. Dirt. Blood.

Flowers.

Yumi wipes her eyes as she presses the lock of hair against her chest before tucking it in the inner pocket of her coat. She walks forward and halts in front of the door.

The door opens to a smiling man. “Yumi. A pleasure to meet you again. I was not expecting you to come here,” Hajoon starts and steps aside to let her enter, “however he had been right, as he often is. He always has a card up sleeve, doesn’t h—”

“Where is he?”

“In his bedroom. He’s recovering.”

“From what?”

Hajoon’s smile grows. “Noxious love.”

Yumi pets the lizard in her hand. Her heart always beats slowly, yet here its pulsations speed up as it never does.

"He's not quite himself. Or rather, he is *too* himself," Hajoon warns. "I'd suggest being… compliant."

She wordlessly trails after Hajoon who rambles about something else she does not bother listening to. They pause in front of a door that has been left ajar.

He pushes it open, and the two of them step inside.

A wooden box rests against the window, propped on a long pedestal. The box is made of polished wood, with sharp angles.

It’s more of a coffin.

One from which the same scent from the hair seeps out of.

Yumi would crumble to her knees if she hadn’t been frozen in place.

“Yumi.”

Her gaze darts toward the voice. The petting of her lizard grows more frantic. She ignores the whines in her mind when her nails scrape some of the scales off. She takes in the plethora of crumbled papers littering the floor, so much that she can only see peeks of wooden slats through it. There’s charcoal on them: traces of lines and silhouettes.

Dohyun is propped against the headboard. His fingers are covered in charcoal but also smudges of dry blood. Some of the nails seem to be ripped off. More importantly…

“Was it Seungwon?”

“Hm? You mean this?” Dohyun points at the bandage covering his left eye, a hideous, raw scar carved down his cheek. “No, it was not. It’s a gift.”

Yumi truly hates the word.

“How… How did you find it?” She glances at the coffin. She wants to steal its content and run away, but she knows nothing is ever so easy with Dohyun. “Even I couldn’t find it, no matter how hard I looked.”

“I suppose you did not look well enough.” Dohyun does not smile as Yumi expects him to. He looks catatonic.

“What do you want?”

“My dove. My dove is…” Dohyun exhales a shaky sigh. His bloodshot eye mists over. "I need to be able to speak with him without being killed, whether it be by those he considers his family, Jungkook, or him, himself. I have to— If I don’t save him, he will—” A sob escapes Dohyun’s mouth. Tears fall from his eyes, one translucent, the other carmine. “I must be able to approach him, but I can’t. Jungkook and the other *ants* will get in my way.”

“I don’t know how I can help with that. My doors won’t be enough anymore to keep you safe, neither will my familiar’s songs.” Yumi hasn’t been blind to the interest her familiar has for Jungkook, nor how her necromancy had been overpowered by his. “They won’t hesitate to kill you anymore.”

Dohyun stares at Yumi.

Yumi stills. Her lizard scurries up her shoulder to hide in the hood of her coat.

“I suppose you aren’t interested in retrieving my present for you, if so?”

Hajoon moves toward the coffin.

“No!” Yumi surges forward but stops at a glance from Dohyun. “Please. *Please.* ”

“Taehyung is my family. He is all I have. You must understand how I feel about my dove.”

Yumi does.

“However he… He must be saved, but I’m not sure how,” Dohyun cries. The heel of his palm presses against his injured eye. Blood seeps through the bandage. “God… My dove… My precious dove…”

“I—I can try to help. Like how I and the other warlocks had done at the dragonborn council. A protective spell?” Yumi nervously surveys Hajoon who shrugs. “A protective spell of some kind. I’ll ask the warlocks I know. And Hyuna. Hyuna is powerful. Or maybe something else can be done for you to speak to Taehyung without being killed.”

“Help me save my family, Yumi, and I will help you have yours.”

Jungkook has spent the day at Yoongi and Namjoon's house.

Yoongi isn't faring too well, as expected. He had cried at Jungkook's arrival, surrounded by a plethora of bouquets and other plants, yet unable to smell any. There had also been a few metal flowers, including one that Yoongi had been clutching in his palm.

They've discussed their options and what Minsoo had told Yoongi after an examination. The conclusion had been clear yet disheartening: research has to be made, however they will hold little hope for a cure.

Yoongi had eventually calmed down. He had even smiled when Jungkook had inquired about the sender of a silver and gold bouquet of flowers.

Jungkook mentions the ball in passing, and after some convincing words from Namjoon about a change of scenery, Yoongi agrees to accompany Jungkook and Taehyung, at the agreed condition that Jimin joins as well.

The night is dark when Jungkook walks back home.

He can't see inside the house, the curtains drawn shut.

Jungkook removes his shoes once inside, then his cloak. The moonlight illuminates the place: the kitchen where a bowl with a note next to it is left, the tiny house Taehyung had built for Revna where she is cuddled in, fast asleep.

The pool of blood at the bottom of the stairs.

It's smeared on one side, the imprint of a hand on it. There's another puddle higher up the stairs, and a second, a third, a fourth. More. They grow smaller where they climb up, but they're still there.

Jungkook's heart falters.

His hands hovers above the sheath of his dagger that he takes out. His steps are mute when he makes his way up the stairs. His ears strain to catch any sound. But there's nothing in the eerie silence for what feels like an eternity.

A rattle in the bathroom rips through the stillness.

Jungkook presses his back against the wall. His grip tightens around the dagger. He holds onto the handle of the bathroom's door, then pushes it ajar.

He expects a gruesome sight. To see Taehyung's corpse torn apart. To see raven nixes having bloomed out of Taehyung's chest.

Jungkook doesn't understand at first.

He wonders why there's another pool of blood near the toilet, why Taehyung is kneeling in front of it, heaving, and heaving some more, and it isn't bile that comes out, but rather more blood.

Taehyung coughs and sniffles. Then he spits and wipes his mouth with his shirt before flushing the toilet, unaware of Jungkook's presence. He collapses down where he sways on his spot, and he drags himself backward, toward the wall that he leans against.

Perspiration covers Taehyung's skin that is more ashen than sun-kissed. His eyes are red, hair sticking to his forehead and temples. Waves of tremors rack through his form one after another. He must finally sense Jungkook, or perhaps catch a whiff of his scent, because his head darts up, eyes wide.

Jungkook's grip loosens around the dagger.

"Taehyung?"

Taehyung's parted mouth closes with a click of teeth. His gaze darts away. "Fuck." This word seems enough for him to descend into a coughing fit that finishes with a splatter of blood on his palm. He wipes it on his pants. But it only serves to smudge it across his fingers.

"What…" Jungkook startles when the dagger clatters on the ground. "What is happening…?"

"Fucking shit."

"Taehyung. What is going on."

Taehyung peers at him. He averts his gaze again.

"Taehyung."

"My breaths aren't just depleting. They're disappearing."

Jungkook thinks back on when they had eaten the pomegranate.

He remembers the distant ache he had felt in his chest.

"It starts with the pouch…"

"...at every change of season..."

"...where it finds an anchor and a place to thrive, then..."

" ...rest of the organs that it erodes one bY..."

"...no cure..."

"...inevitable, agonizing death."

"No." Jungkook's pants are loud, growing erratic. "No. That's not— That's not true." He shakes his head. "Taehyung, this can't be… You're lying to me again, right? Please tell me you're lying to me. I'll forgive you. I'll forgive you right away. Tell me you're lying."

Taehyung looks pained, the kind that renders the pools of blood benign.

“How long.”

Taehyung doesn’t reply.

“How lo—” Jungkook pauses to press the back of his hand against his mouth. “Taehyung. How long. Have you known for.”

The corner of Taehyung’s nose twitches, the muscles of his jaw shifting.

“Taehyung! How—”

“Some weeks or so. Maybe more. Maybe less. I don’t know anymore.” Taehyung rises to his feet, bracing himself on the wall. He crosses the distance and halts in front of Jungkook. “Time has been odd, and at first I didn’t think it was the plague. Neither of us did.”

“You haven’t told anyone anything?”

“Minsoo knows. Elder Miseon and Hyuna too. That’s all.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t know how.”

“That’s not enough of an excuse.”

“I didn’t think either of you could handle knowing the truth.”

Jungkook anchors himself on the pain his nails sink into his palm.

“I told you in Kaiya that my secr—”

“I didn’t even *begin* to imagine that it could involve the plague. That *you* would have it. I only thought there was an issue with your breaths.”

“There is one.”

“Don’t play with words right now.”

“I’m sor—”

“Don’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“ *Don’t.* I can’t believe—” Jungkook exhales but it sounds more like a whine. “God.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“You did. You had a choice. And you chose to hide this from us.”

“It’s… It’s done, and now you know even if—”

“Now I know? *Now I know?* I know that my husband has an arcanic, fatal disease? You didn’t tell either of us!" Jungkook shoves Taehyung who staggers backward. Guilt seers through Jungkook.

"How long did you intend to keep this secret? Would you have even told me if it hadn't been for Kaiya? What about your parents? And Jimin?! What about me!" Jungkook taps his chest, the tears hot on his cheeks. "Why wouldn't you tell *me!* Why did I have to find out through you heaving blood on our bathroom floor!"

"I had no fucking clue on how to tell this to anyone. It's no meager weather news to share."

"You talk to us!"

"Talking? Yeah, sure. Let's try." Taehyung shuffles closer and rasps "Hey, Viper, I just found out that the reason why I've been having a sore throat, a painful breath pouch and a depleting arcane is because I got hit by a deadly, untreatable plague that may or may not try to destroy my organs one by one, and that may or may not be targeting my soul as well. Have a nice fucking morning."

"You should have talked!"

"How?! How do I tell my mom and dad about it?! How do I tell Jimin that I have the plague when my disappearance ruined them six years ago?! My mom couldn't even sleep! Or eat! Do you have any idea of how mangling the guilt is because I was too weak back then to— To get away fro—" Taehyung sharply inhales. "I still don't know how to tell them this. I don't. Didn't think they could handle it. I didn't *want* them to handle it."

"You're not supposed to keep to yourself the fact that you're dying. You're *dying* ."

"I'm not dying."

"There are puddles of your blood in our home. You've coughed blood. You've *heaved* blood."

"That's a recent development, I'm fine."

Jungkook laughs and it sounds maniacal to his own ears. "This is the worst thing to be in denial about."

"You're forgetting about my healing breath."

Jungkook falls mute.

"And about Minsoo. He's been helping me, so has Hyuna."

"Who else knows."

"Some other Elders, 'cause they want me to visit them and study my case since it's an unprecedented one."

"God…"

"I'm not dying. Only my arcane is."

Jungkook breaks into tears. He doesn't stop, not caring about how loud he may be. Arms wrap around him and he has half a mind to push them away, but instead he staggers toward Taehyung, gripping onto the back of his shirt.

"I'm not dying. With Minsoo, we… We've been keeping the plague's effect at bay."

“You heaved blood.”

“Turns out the manor clusterfuck then accidentally making a thunderstorm nearly the size of Vanae may have fucked me up a tad more than anticipated. I also think there’s something wrong with Kaiya’s gift. I do cough some blood, but I’ve never heaved any up till now. But I’m fine, I promise.”

“You can’t die.”

“I won’t.” Taehyung cups Jungkook’s face with a hand, his thumb rubbing circles on the cheek and fruitlessly trying to wipe away the tears. “We need to have that chase, remember? You mentioned a wedding dance too.”

“The next pulse is soon.”

“I know.”

“What if you get it again?”

“The plague is already in my breath pouch.”

“You’re dying. Tae… You’re dying.”

“I’m healing myself. My arcane is stronger. The plague is more of an annoying allergy that makes me cough some blood here and there.”

“What happens when your arcane is so eroded by the plague that it can’t fight it off anymore? A dragonborn’s breath pouch *can* be emptied. Yours was *several times.* What happens when the plague has nothing to take from you anymore?”

“Then we’ll find another solution. I’ve probably had it since winter’s pulse. It’s almost been three months, whereas other people have died within days, a week at most. Yet I’m still alive and well. I’m not weak,” Taehyung rasps, his words sounding like a plea. “I’m not weak. We’ve been keeping a close eye on my vitals, my arcane pool and its potency. Minsoo has been making some medications for me as well.”

“Does… Does he have the plague? But how would he still—”

“He doesn’t. The vial he’s been drinking from is a golden nix enhancer. He’s been using his breaths a lot for me, so it’s taking a toll on him.”

“God…”

“I know everything sounds… damned, but I promise you it’s not. And I can still make arcane kisses.” Taehyung tries to press a lightning kiss on Jungkook’s forehead with two of his fingers, but Jungkook steps out of his grasp. Taehyung’s mouth opens then closes. He drags a trembling hand down his face, his gaze haggard.

“You can’t keep these kinds of things away from me, Taehyung. I— My husband is dying, and—” Jungkook emits an aborted breath, his voice stifled. “I knew you were lying, but I was so naive, I… Never in my worst nightmare could I have imagined for this to be your secret. For you to lie about something so grievous.”

“I’m sorry.”

A matter flashes in Jungkook’s head.

He swivels around and seizes his dagger from the ground.

He rushes down the stairs to the basement. He nearly trips and falls on his way down but catches himself just in time.

Taehyung’s fire illuminates the area, then a lantern does.

“Jungkook?”

Jungkook sees it.

He kneels in front of the box that he rips the lid from after breaking the lock with his dagger. He retrieves a book from it, along with a paper that he reads the instructions of. The book is snatched away from him moments later.

“No.”

“But—”

“I’ll burn it. You’re not using this for me.”

“It can grant a wish. Several of them. Maybe I can wish the plague out of you. I can wish to keep you safe or—”

“You won’t do either of those. I won't let you."

"You don't get to decide *anything* about this."

"You're not wasting your lifespan on me."

"I wouldn't be wasting—”

"Yes you would!"

"I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't even know if it'd work!"

"I would try anyway!"

"What if it steals what years you have left to live where you die the very next second after your wish?!"

"It wouldn't matter!"

Taehyung recoils, the ghost of a familiar heartbreak drowning him. "It would to Revna and Namjoon and Yoongi. To *me.* "

"You don't get to decide."

"I won't give you a fucking choice, Jungkook." Fury simmers in Taehyung's clouded eyes, mad and mournful. He stalks forward, halting less than a foot away from Jungkook. "I'll lock you in this very room myself to hide this book. It'd be so far away from your reach that even Yoongi's ravens would be worthless to find it."

"I will do whatever I dee—”

"You won't."

Jungkook sinks the tip of his dagger against Taehyung's throat. A warning that slithers through his every word. “I am the successor of Amaris' throne, your husband, and leader by your sides.”

"It doesn't change a damn th—”

" *My* heritage binds death to its very will," Jungkook cuts in. The dagger slithers down between Taehyung's collarbones. It never breaks through the skin.

"You can't—” Taehyung's back collides against the wall with a hollow thud.

"I am your chaos, and you are *mine* ."

The ire in Taehyung's eyes falters into something hopeless.

"I will do as I damn well please, Kim Taehyung." The blade presses harder when it reaches the navel. "Or so help me God I will tear your chest open right then and there. The plague will not be the one to take you away from me.”

“Jung—”

“I won't watch you die.”

“I won't let you risk your life for mine.”

“If I want to give years of my life for yours, I will. If I must die for you, I will. I’ll raise myself and die again. There is nothing you can do to stop me. Nothing. I’ll bargain with the Gods to have you back, Taehyung. I’ll bargain with Death itself until it fears *me* . You won't die for as long as I am alive.”

“And when *you* die trying to save me? Then—”

“Then I’ll die, but you won’t.”

“I’d die too, but it wouldn’t be from the plague.”

The words linger heavily in the air, raw and honest, terrified and lost.

“I’m fine for now.”

Jungkook's grip around the dagger's handle wavers. His fingers tremble. "We don't know how long this will last, not with the next pulse that may worsen your state.”

Taehyung cards a hand through his hair before covering his mouth. "You're—”

Jungkook seizes the wishing book from his loose grasp.

Taehyung's head knocks against the wall he slums against, gaze aimed at the ceiling. "You can't risk your life for mine, through this book, or any other means. What would become of your family? Of Revna?"

"You don't understand. You don't understand a *thing*."

"*You* are the one not understanding a damn thing. If something happens to you—"

"You can't die. You can't. *Die.* You can't leave me alone." Jungkook's gaze blurs with unshed tears, his timber raspy, quiet to his own ears, and he's cold. So damn cold. "You can't because who would hold me at night? Who would shush my nightmares and the voice? Who would I talk with about the Arcanes? About botany? About every silly thing that happens in my life? Whose nightmare would *I* shush? Whose hand would I hold? Whose… Whose arcane would cherish mine? Keep me safe? Kiss me?"

Taehyung's head tips forward as he exhales Jungkook's name, a plea that Jungkook ignores.

"Who would be all of this to me if not you, Taehyung? There's no one else but you."

"Jungkook, please…"

"I don't want to live in a world without you. I *can't."*

"Jungkook." Taehyung's voice breaks. "Stop, I…" He hunches forward, breathing heavily.

The dagger and book fall from Jungkook's grasp. His palms find Taehyung's face that he lifts. "You can't die."

"You… You can't die for me, or anyone else," Taehyung cries through a ragged breath. "I can't even bear hearing you speak about— What would I do if you… Elders, what would I— I don't know what I'd do if you— I'd be alone too. I'd be so alone. I don't want to be alone again."

"You won't ever be alone again."

"You can't die."

"Neither can you, no matter the cost."

Taehyung tentatively holds onto Jungkook's wrist, nuzzling his nose and tears in the palm. "My heart hurts."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't leave me."

"I won't."

"I'm sorry," Taehyung murmurs again amidst the embrace. "I wanted to tell you, but I— I was scared. And cowardly. When I found out about it, it wasn't a good time, I was lost in myself. So I thought I'd wait, but then the fear got worse. Got scared you'd leave, that it'd be too much for my

parents and Jimin. For you. So I— I didn’t say anything. And the lies got worse, the time in-between grew, the fear grew.”

Jungkook lets go of Taehyung to watch him. "We aren't weak."

“I know.”

“We can handle this. I’ll cry, and I’ll yell, and I’ll be angry and terrified, but I can handle it. I can handle you.”

“I’m sorry," Taehyung wetly says.

"Foolish husband…" Jungkook kisses Taehyung's forehead, then the damp cheeks and finally the temple. “When did you know you had it?” He asks, to divert himself and Taehyung away from the turmoil drowning both of their hearts.

“I… I started feeling sick some time ago.”

“I remember.”

“We discarded the possibility of it being the plague, 'cause people die from it within days, and I wasn’t showing any grievous signs of deterioration of my breath, or pouch. But one day I was flying. My vision got blurry. I crashed down. You said the plague felt like it was eating you from the inside, and that’s how it felt back then for me too, then..."

◯◯ Minsoo's lair, Taehyung, a few weeks ago... ◯◯

“This is the plague,” Taehyung says in-between two sharp intakes of air. “F—Fuck. Fuck.”

Minsoo guides Taehyung to a chair. “Sit.”

Taehyung thinks he might pass out again.

“I’m gonna die. I’m gonna die soon. What am I gonna tell Jimin? And Ju—”

“When did you start feeling sick?”

“After the manor. It’s when it really started, but then it got better and went away, so I didn’t think much of it. Thought it was because of the runes on the cuffs and now I’m—”

“So it’s been a while, much longer since winter started. You should have died from the plague already.”

“Why am I not? What if it happens tomorrow?”

“You’re forgetting about your healing breath.”

Taehyung peers at his grandfather.

“It’s keeping you alive. It must be regenerating whatever it is that the plague damages. You also said the scars have been even more painful since the manor, probably because your breath is too occupied healing the plague to have the energy to aid with the pain. You shouldn’t be alive, kid. Yet you are. You’re fine, for the most part,” Minsoo assures, having already done his examination. “Your vitals are good. Your heart and lungs too.”

“What about my breath pouch?”

“I can’t tell.”

“What?”

“It’s… clouded. I can’t examine nor sense it at all, but it’s obviously still there.”

“Fuck.”

“It probably means that the plague’s arcane is contained in your breath pouch and has yet to properly reach the rest of your organs. It’s a good thing.”

“You can’t tell anyone about this.”

“This isn’t a secret you should keep.”

“We won’t *tell anyone. Not yet.”*

“What about Jung — ” Minsoo quietens when a staccato erupts in the lair. He sighs. “We need to tell Elder Miseon at the very least. You may be the first and only dragonborn to have survived the plague. This could be what’s needed to find a cure.”

Taehyung nods. His eyes sting. “Fuck.” He lets himself be pulled upward and tugged into a hug as he breaks down.

Minsoo pats his back. “It’ll be fine, kid. We’ll find a damn cure, got it?”

“We can’t tell Mom.”

“Yeah… I won’t.”

Taehyung leans back minutes later. He watches Minsoo wipe his eyes.

“Elders… You’ll give me even more gray hair than I already have.”

Taehyung emits a wet chuckle. “I’d rather have it be me who has it rather than you or someone else in the family. Hoseok and Seokjin are safe from it for now too.”

“Right, right. Let’s visit Miseon now. I’ll need her help to make some potions. I may be able to help mitigate the plague’s secondary effects.”

“Okay.”

Minsoo slams a palm between Taehyung’s shoulders. “You’ve survived hell with that man. You can survive a silly plague.”

○○ *Now* ○○

"After that, we spoke to Elder Miseon and confirmed that I have the plague," Taehyung continues, his words less slurred, calmer. "I haven't visited the place where the Elders reside yet, but I'll have to as soon as possible. It was on pause with Kaiya's upcoming visit and all that happened before it. But I'm fine and—"

"I don't believe you."

Taehyung looks as though he has been punched in the face. He nods anyway, the motion curt. "Do you want to talk to Minsoo and Elder Miseon?"

"Yes."

"We can take care of that tomorrow. It's too late right now, and I need to clean the bathroom."

"No."

"Wh… What do you mean?"

"I'll clean. Meanwhile you should take a shower. You've got blood on yourself and you look like a mess. I don't want Revna to see you like this." Jungkook hopes she hasn't heard them nor seen the blood.

"Jungkook…"

"I can clean it."

Taehyung silently surveys Jungkook, his gaze searching. He must find his answer because he nods again and walks out of the basement, Jungkook on his trail.

Revna is thankfully still asleep.

Taehyung removes his pants and tainted shirt before turning on the shower knob and stepping in.

The two of them don't exchange any other word.

Taehyung cleans himself. Jungkook cleans the blood on the floorings.

The more Jungkook does so, the calmer he feels.

There is not an ounce of disgust that erupts in him when he squeezes his husband's blood from a sponge, nor when he empties a bucket full of bloody water in the toilet, only to fill it back up with clean water.

When Taehyung comes out of the shower, dressed in new pajamas, wiped from any traces of what has once occurred, he looks better. He looks good. It's no wonder he has managed to hide this from any prying eyes. From glancing at him, one wouldn't think he had heaved blood an hour ago.

"I'd like for us to tell Revna as well," Jungkook says, standing at the entrance door.

"Yeah, me too. We can do it now. Maybe I could… I should—" Taehyung exhales. "I think I should tell everyone else tomorrow as well, while Minsoo and Elder Miseon are here."

"Okay."

"Tomorrow."

Jungkook turns around.

He climbs down the stairs, Taehyung on his toes.

“Lovely?”

Revna emits some intelligible noise. She slithers out of her small house, making her way toward Jungkook. ***“Yesss.”***

“You weren’t sleeping?”

“Revna heard yells, so Revna woke up.”

Jungkook’s lips pinch into a thin line. “Sorry, Lovely. Taehyung and I have to talk to you about something important.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Jungkook settles down on the couch. Revna cuddles up on his lap.

Taehyung remains standing, the coffee table between himself and Jungkook. “You know about the plague, right? We’ve talked about it with you before.”

“Revna does. Fierce Dragon said it’s a bad disease, and that it kills a lot of dragonborns.”

“Yeah, something like that. It’s—”

“Taetae has the plague?”

Jungkook’s mouth parts open in surprise. A similar expression paints Taehyung’s face.

“I— Yeah. I do. How did you know?”

“Kookie and Taetae have this serious face, and they ask if Revna knows the plague. Revna isn’t dumb, you know...”

Jungkook can't help but burst into laughter at the petulance in Revna's tone and he's a little hysterical, clutching at his navel as he doubles over.

"Right…" Taehyung looks sheepish. "You're indeed very smart."

"Mhm, indeed very smart," Revna repeats.

"I can't believe she figured that out in seconds," Jungkook gasps.

"Revna indeed very smart!" She interjects and nibbles Jungkook's hand.

"Yes, you are." Jungkook pets her crown.

"Is Taetae dying? Taetae can't die. Taetae is strong."

"I'm not dying, but I do have the plague. My healing breath is keeping me safe."

"Then why Kookie yelled?"

"Because I hadn't told him that I have the plague, and he was—"

Revna gasps. ***"Taetae lied! Will Kookie ground Taetae like when Kookie does when Revna lies?"***

"Well, I hadn't thought of that, but perhaps I should," Jungkook answers, and he smiles when Revna solemnly nods.

"Are Taetae and Kookie fighting?"

"This isn't your business to worry about, Lovely," Jungkook says and Revna huffs. "I'm sorry you heard us."

"It's fine. Is that all?"

"Yes?"

"Okay. Then Revna goes back to sleep now."

"I… Uh…" Taehyung trails off. "Do you have any questions?"

"Is Taetae dying?"

"I'm not."

"Okay then everything is good. Revna is sleepy. Belly full from nixes. Goodniiight." On this last word, Revna wiggles toward her little house where she cozies herself in, gnawing on one of her toys.

Taehyung blinks a few times. "Alright…" He peers at Jungkook.

Jungkook looks back at him, legs folded and arms crossed over his lap.

They survey each other in silence before Taehyung tentatively speaks again. "I'm gonna head to bed..."

Jungkook nods.

Taehyung stands there for a moment. His hand twitches forward with an aborted motion. He lowers his gaze and twists his head before making his way up the stairs.

Jungkook enters the solarium when Taehyung is gone.

His gaze flits on the painted gift hanging there that he turns himself away from. He settles down on a lounging chair, head lolled against the backrest. He peers at the ceiling, at the moonlight that brightens it.

He does not move when tears slide down his temples and disappear in his hair.

His lids fall shut.

Jungkook is worried. Of course he is. His husband is afflicted by a deadly plague, after all. Yet, the torturing, wrenching agony in his chest slowly abates. The tears fall and fall, then they eventually stop. The stifling matter in his throat diminishes. His nails that had been boring reddened crescent into his arms relent their grip.

The situation is dire. Catastrophic, really.

Taehyung has the plague.

Jungkook has lost his necromancy.

Seohyung and Dohyun are both alive and well, looming over them both.

Yet, something deep-seated roots within Jungkook.

Maybe it’s an acceptance, a gentle *‘Do something about it.’* Maybe it’s a denial that Jungkook does not care to rectify. According to Taehyung himself, he's not dying, right?

Or perhaps it is a misplaced assurance. The simple knowledge that, no matter what happens, he and Taehyung are together. They will heal each other’s wounds, fight each other’s foes, be each other’s peace. If fate decides otherwise, Jungkook supposes that Kaiya may welcome two new inhabitants.

Jungkook rises to his feet.

They're steady. Assured.

He doesn’t know how long he has remained like this, but his neck hurts, his limbs are frozen, and shivers cascade through him one after another. It’s only when he reads the time on the clock that he realizes nearly five hours have passed.

He checks up on Revna who is fast asleep.

He steps into the suffocating bathroom, brushes his teeth, but discards the rest of his nightly routine.

The bedroom's darkness is only disturbed by the swaying light the lantern casts inside. He places it on the bedside table.

Taehyung moves under the blankets.

Jungkook snuffs out the lantern. “Did I wake you up?”

“Wasn’t sleeping.” Taehyung’s voice is rough, gravelly.

Jungkook settles in bed, his back to Taehyung. The thick curtains are tugged, only allowing a thin ribbon of moonlight in the room.

The mattress dips when Taehyung sits up at the edge of the bed, facing away. He stays there, unmoving.

The air is stuffy with unspoken words. Jungkook decides to surrender some of them.

“Were you scared when you first found out?”

“Terrified,” Taehyung answers in a whisper.

Jungkook should have been there for Taehyung.

“But Minsoo reminded me of my healing breath, and…”

Jungkook waits but Taehyung never continues. “Are you scared now?”

“Of what?”

“The plague.” *What else?*

“No. Are you?”

“Of course. No matter how much you may try to undermine your condition, several parts of you *are* dying. Your arcane is. Your breath pouch is. Your soul might be too. It’s scary, but it’s… It’s a comforting fear. We’ll figure it out together.”

“And if we can’t?”

“We have to. *You* have to. You don’t have a choice.”

Taehyung makes a sound, something that resembles a stifled laugh.

Jungkook peers behind his shoulder.

Taehyung is staring ahead. His gaze is… absent, disturbed by the drops that slide down his cheeks one after another. He stands.

Jungkook grabs his wrist. “Don’t leave. Please.”

Taehyung settles back down. He lays on his side at Jungkook's pull, and Jungkook does so as well, the two of them peering at each other.

Jungkook’s thumb rubs soothing patterns on Taehyung’s inner wrist. The pulse thrums too rapidly. “We’ll find a cure.”

Taehyung laughs and laughs and *laughs* before it dies in an aborted sob. He lifts a trembling hand to cover his trembling mouth, but it does nothing to hide his reddened eyes.

“Tae?”

“This isn’t… It's not about that. I’m not afraid of the plague. Elders…” Taehyung laughs again. “A plague doesn’t scare me, but…”

“What are your tears for?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“After the basement, when I went upstairs, and you didn’t come with me, nor join me after an hour, then two, then more, I thought… Thought— Thought this was it. That I fucked up for good. That lying to you, hiding this from you, having a husband like me would be, would be the last drop for you. I don’t know. I just— I spiraled. You weren’t supposed to find out like this, nor see me in that state. I don—”

“I don’t want to lose you. To anything.”

Ah…

Really…

Jungkook shouldn’t be feeling the way he does, knowing who Taehyung’s tears are shed for. Yet he can’t repress the tendrils of warmth and raw affection that slither their way through his veins and coil around his heart.

He combs a hand through Taehyung’s locks, then cups his face next, shuffling ever so closer. “You’re underestimating how attached I am to you. Have you not listened to a single word I've said?”

“You can still leave someone who has wronged you, no matter how attached you are to them.”

“Would you leave me? If I were to wrong you? Would you dare doing so, Taehyung?”

“I don’t think anything you could do could make me leave you.”

“You can’t lie to me again.”

“I won’t.”

"You can't die."

Taehyung says nothing.

“And you won’t lose me so easily. I’m too selfish to let you go anyway. I don’t think I would leave even if you were to ask,” Jungkook says, and this addition soothes out the tenseness in Taehyung. “I’m mad at you, at the plague, and at the world, if I want to be dramatic.”

“I wasn’t saying this to make you feel bad.”

“I know.” Something drifts past the bridge of Jungkook’s nose. He exhales, pained yet content.

“I don’t know why I’m so scared of losing you.”

“Because it happened a week ago. Because your heart broke for me, and will be mended by me, with my word, my touches." *My love.* "I'm terrified of losing you too.”

Taehyung and Jungkook exhale a trembling sigh together.

Taehyung gingerly rests an arm across Jungkook’s waist, the palm slowly cupping the spine. “This okay?”

“Always.”

A nod. "I intended to tell you. I promise. Even more after Kaiya.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m sorry you have to deal with this on top of everything else.”

“It gets worse before it gets better, right?”

“We’ll have those holidays when it’s all over.”

“Yes… We will.”

“I won’t die."

“I won’t let you die.”

“The book—”

“I—”

“It shouldn’t get to the point of you using it, but if it does, we’ll find a way to undo its consequences.”

Jungkook emits a soft sound. “That sounds like a plan.”

“I won’t let you die either.”

Jungkook chuckles and cradles Taehyung’s face a little better. He places the pad of his thumbs on the lids that fall shut, feeling too exposed for what he wants to say. “May I speak my mind?”

“Always.”

“Isn’t it precious?”

“What is?”

“Dying for each other.”

The back and forth of Taehyung’s palm halts.

“You grazed death several times to protect me… I’m willing to give away years of my lifespan for you… I think it’s precious.”

Loving.

“It is.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s not something anyone should like.”

“Is that a ‘yes’?” Jungkook’s thumbs drift aside to peer into Taehyung’s hazy gaze.

The answer at first is Taehyung who pulls Jungkook closer, then it forms into a pair of lips that presses on Jungkook’s forehead.

“How come you’re not scared of the plague anymore, Tae?”

“The way it erodes my breaths is… It hurts, but it feels good.”

“How so?”

“The more the plague eats, the less present my arcane is. It’s nice… To not be afraid of myself anymore, to not have to always worry that any emotion I feel may turn into chaos around me. To not have to restrain myself as much. I always thought I was free, but I think I’m only starting to know what it really feels like now.”

If Jungkook had the will to leave Taehyung’s arms, he’d barge inside Dahee and Junhyun’s home. He’d curse them for having failed to protect Taehyung so often, in so many different ways. But it wouldn’t be justified, would it? It wouldn't be fair to them. And Jungkook doesn't want to leave Taehyung's side anyway.

Jungkook falls into quiet cries anew.

They rattle through him for minutes, hours, an eternity where he's held in a desperate hug. Taehyung caresses Jungkook with his fingertips. He holds his nape, safe and sound, grounding and keeping him afloat. He whispers words in Jungkook's ears: of reassurance, tender selfishness, and so much more.

"Everything's alright."

"Death does not frighten me with you by my side."

"We'll find a solution for everything, and if not, we'll create it ourselves, isn't that right, Gem?"

Jungkook tucks each and every word within his soul.

"I'll live for you, and so will you for me."

The entire family is at Jungkook and Taehyung's house.

Miseon and Minsoo are present as well. They must notice something and draw their own conclusions because they aim encouraging smiles at Taehyung.

The large group is exchanging quips together, laughing in the living room where Hoseok, Seokjin and Jimin are bickering. Revna is installed on Junhyun's lap, complaining about this and that. Dahee's hourglass is turned. She's able to speak everyone's language for the next hour or so. Jungkook is installed next to her, the two of them silent.

Jungkook peers ahead in the kitchen where Taehyung is rummaging through. He muses about how he and Taehyung should purchase a new couch to accommodate the size of their family.

"How are Cahira and Donovan?" Dahee wonders.

"Hopefully well," Miseon replies. "I haven't gotten the chance to visit Kaiya again since we've left."

"I would like to know when this nonsense will be done and dealt with." Dahee dismissively waves at the hourglass. "It has been cumbersome."

"It might be a temporary matter, however I will inquire with Cahira."

"So, why were we all summoned here?" Hoseok pipes up. "Something new came up?"

"Probably to talk about Kaiya, no?" Jimin says.

"What's left to say? Also Jin still hasn't figured out what his gift is."

"Which is infuriating," Seokjin grumbles.

Jungkook tunes them all out when Taehyung walks into the living room.

Taehyung stands in front of the fireplace. Eye bags darken his tired gaze that fixates at a point ahead of him. He doesn't grant Jungkook or anyone else a glance.

"Taehyung?"

It's Jimin.

Taehyung's eyes cast low.

He inhales and exhales through his mouth.

"I have the plague."

Taehyung speaks and does not stop. He explains what he had told Jungkook in the bathroom while adding more details of how and when the symptoms had started. He expands more about the impact on his arcane and health, all while reassuring the group that, all things considered, he is fairing well.

No one intervenes nor asks any questions yet.

When Taehyung is done, he heavily breathes in.

The silence stretches for a while.

A few are crying, mainly Jimin and Hoseok. Yoongi has a look of understanding that washes across his face. Most people are frozen in a state of shock, aside from Revna who confusedly looks at the group.

To Jungkook's surprise, Dahee looks positively *mad.*

She springs up and marches toward her son. Her hand raises in the air where it hovers. Taehyung's gaze is settled on hers that has taken an amber hue. "You foolish, reckless, idiotic son."

"I'm sor—"

"Save me from your meaningless apologies." Dahee's glower snaps on Minsoo. "Do you somehow have the plague as well? Why haven't you died from it yet?"

"I don't have it, but I've been drinking golden nix concoctions to help him." Minsoo nods toward Taehyung.

"You hid this from me," Dahee seethes, striding toward her father. "You hid from me the fact that my own son is sick. It was not your secret to keep."

"Neither was it mine to tell."

"I asked him and Elder Miseon not to say anything to anyone," Taehyung interjects. "He didn't agree with my decision at all."

"He still followed this childish, selfish demand of yours." Dahee says some more, her tongue curling around draconic words. She then paces around for a brief moment before sitting down on the couch again. Her shoulder is almost scalding near Jungkook's. "Who else knew."

"Hyuna. That's it."

"You didn't even tell Jungkook?" Dahee's nose coils around the twitch of a snarl. "If there is someone who deserves to know, it is your own *husband,* the one you've vowed your life to."

"I know. It just wasn't easy to—"

“Keep your excuses for someone who cares to hear them.”

Jungkook has to bite back a smile at the way Taehyung withdraws on himself, like a rightfully scolded child.

“You’re grounded,” Dahee announces.

Taehyung gawks at his mother.

Minsoo snorts while Yoongi and Namjoon smile. Even Jimin’s lips curve up the slightest bit when Revna's snickers echo in the room.

“I’m 26 years old."

“That is news to me, lying child,” Dahee fires back.

“You can’t ground me anymore.”

“I am your mother. I will do as I damn well please.”

Jungkook’s shoulders shake with contained laughter when Taehyung closes and opens his mouth several times before crossing his arms over his chest.

“Do you believe either of us to be weak, Son?”

Taehyung’s shoulders drop. “No.”

“I will give you one last chance to answer truthfully.”

Taehyung’s lips pinch. “Not anymore…”

Dahee mutters a long, winded sentence in draconian.

Pairs of eyes drift on Miseon who smiles.

“A series of wordy expletives I refuse to translate,” Miseon answers the mute question.

“How high are the chances of you dying?” Jimin wonders.

Taehyung does not look at him when he replies. “Not that high at all. I mean it when I say that I’m fine for the most part.”

“Is this true?” Jungkook can tell that Taehyung is hurt by the question he aims at Minsoo. Minsoo nods. “He heaved blood yesterday.”

Jimin and Junhyun look alarmed.

Miseon frowns. “Had you before?” Taehyung shakes his head. “It may be an effect of Kaiya’s gift.”

“Jungkook and I thought the same.”

“Is there anything about the plague that could be confirmed through Taehyung?” Jungkook continues.

“Quite a lot, yes. We believe that we have come to a full understanding of how it works on a dragonborn, aside from the more incorporeal aspect that will require Jungkook’s aid,” Miseon starts. “The plague works in three stages. It first develops in the breath pouch, then it spreads to the remainder of the organs from there. It will then finish its course by reducing the pouch and arcane in it to dust. Taehyung has also told us that the plague devours, for lack of a better word.”

“Devours?”

“It’s hard to explain, but I think the plague needs sustenance,” Taehyung says. “I can feel its hunger.”

“In Taehyung’s case, his healing breath works as some kind of shield that prevents the plague from corroding his organs.”

“Fully?” Junhyun asks.

“Not fully, but mostly. So far the damage on his organs has been benign enough for me to heal them,” Minsoo answers.

“The plague simply swirls in Taehyung’s breath pouch, trying to attack, but never quite managing to do so,” Miseon continues. “The most grievous predicament is that his arcane is depleting and isn’t able to fully regenerate. The seal on his hemomancy makes matters worse as well. It completely removes a segment of his breaths.”

Jimin curses. "Fucking Council."

“Lo’ and behold. Challenging the Council wasn’t as inconsequential as you and Jungkook thought,” Hoseok jests through a sniffle. “What a mess...”

“I’d do it again,” Taehyung mutters. “They betrayed Jungkook and I, chained me down like a mere griffin.”

Hoseok tuts. “You’re a fucking dumbass.”

“Shut up.”

“What about his breaths?” Seokjin asks next. “What is happening with them, exactly?”

Taehyung, Minsoo and Miseon exchange a gaze. “When I say that the plague erodes my breaths, I mean that I feed them to it. I let it feast on my arcane.”

“Feast?” Jimin echoes. “What does that entail?”

“I’m losing my breaths,” Taehyung confesses. “Each piece of my arcane that I’ve given to the plague never came back.”

“But…” Jimin clutches onto his pants. “But our arcane can regenerate.”

“To some extent, but what happens when it has nothing to regenerate itself from? Our arcane solely comes from our breath pouch, unlike warlocks. A good thing is that I’m a chaos dragon, so while my pool of arcane is depleting, it still is greater than most dragonborns. It’s just that… The plague eats a lot. I manage to segment my breaths and give pieces from each of them, but still.”

“So if you were to entirely give your fire breath, it would be gone?”

“Most likely, but I don’t really care about that,” Taehyung shrugs.

“You’d still be alive,” Jimin breathes out, his lips trembling. “You’d be alive.”

Taehyung smiles. “Yes. I’d rather lose my breaths than die. I’m still trying to minimize and spread the damage to every breath rather than focusing on just one.”

“We do not know what a chaos dragon completely losing one of their breath may provoke,” Dahee muses.

Jimin’s gaze darts on Jungkook. “What about his soul? Is the plague eating it?”

“Now that I know about this,” Jungkook says with a pointed look at Taehyung, “I can help. Maybe find a way to see or touch Taehyung’s soul.”

“Aww, but you already have, right? Right?” Hoseok croons and elbows Jimin in the ribs. Jimin shakes his head but Hoseok’s quip meets its intended effect when Jimin draws a small smile.

“In Kaiya, Taehyung and I—” Jungkook pauses. “My flames touched Taehyung’s heart at some point. Physically so. I may be able to reach his soul if a door opens. Me or another necromancer could.”

“Yumi?”

A collective groan erupts in the house.

Jungkook heaves a sigh and slumps down his seat. “Fuck. I can’t believe we may have to rely on her.”

“What I can’t believe is that you’ve just cursed,” Namjoon says.

“He cursed at me several times yesterday,” Taehyung adds.

“Because my husband is fucking *dying.* ”

“I did tell you it’d come back around to bite you in the ass,” Minsoo quips.

“Yeah, well, I was worried about Mom killing me before the plague did.”

Jimin and Hoseok explode in a series of protests of *‘You can’t joke about that!’, ‘This isn’t funny, you piece of shit!’, ‘What if it happens and this is your epitaph?!’*

“I’d be the one to carve it on his tomb,” Yoongi jests, earning himself a slap on the knee from Jimin. “ *‘Here lies Kim Taehyung, a man of much vanity, many recklessness, and endless obliviousness, who has died to protect what he cherishes the most: his idiocy.’”*

“I’ll fucking kill you, warlock,” Taehyung threatens, but it’s rendered null by upward twitch of his lips.

“It’s not funny,” Jimin exclaims through a wet laugh.

Dahee sighs next to Jungkook.

She watches Jimin who suddenly bursts into tears, and the latter is brought into a hug by Taehyung. Junhyun joins them, holding them both in his arms and rubbing their backs.

“Are you alright?” Jungkook shyly asks Dahee. He immediately regrets it. “It’s a stupid question… Sorry.”

“All these years I was convinced that not telling them would keep them safe from it, and it had, but now they know, and…”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know.” Dahee kindly peers at Jungkook. “Are you alright, dear?”

“We’ve been wasting our time not knowing before. I’m mad at him.”

“You and me both.”

“But I also understand where he comes from. I was once like this,” Jungkook softens.

Dahee pats his knee, keeping it there in a comforting weight. “How has your necromancy been?”

“Dormant? I can’t feel it, but Taehyung says he does.”

Dahee squeezes his knee. “We will take care of this as well. No warlock should be losing their arcane, another unprecedented case. It worries me dearly.”

Jungkook ducks his head to conceal his smile. “Thank you.”

“We’ll find a solution, alright?” Taehyung says to a sniveling Jimin. “Still as ugly as ever when you cry.”

“Fuck you,” is Jimin’s feeble riposte. “You’re such a pain in the ass. Always causing trouble.”

“I blame my draconic heritage.”

Jungkook can tell that Taehyung is taken aback by this, that he mustn’t have expected the group to take the news this well.

Or as well as one can, considering the circumstances.

The conversation continues, calmer as the news settles in. The group speaks of what can be done to help Taehyung, and to Jungkook’s teary happiness, they also discuss for a long while the disappearance of his necromancy, and how to solve both problems.

Even Jimin seems more at peace, speaking with Junhyun while holding Yoongi’s hand.

Jungkook meets Taehyung’s dazed eyes, who is standing still, arms limp by his sides.

Foolish husband.

Jungkook reduces the space between the two of them. Unlike what Taehyung would naturally do, his hand does not find its way on Jungkook’s lower back. So Jungkook takes one of them, placing it

there where it belongs. He hums when the palm presses and pulls him closer.

Jungkook plays with the hair at the base of Taehyung's nape.

He wants to kiss him.

Taehyung's fingers travel along Jungkook's back in a delicate, heavenly drag, and Jungkook shivers beneath it. When they halt on the scalp where they softly pull on some strands, Jungkook listens to the mute demand and leans back.

Taehyung looks at Jungkook as he had in the field of spider-lilies, with an adoration that runs down Jungkook's spine akin to the slow fingertips.

"You're an imbecile," Jungkook murmurs.

"So you've said."

"What shall I do with a husband like you, mh? Would you even have the cleverness to catch me if I were to fall again?"

Taehyung looks peeved. "I've done so many times in the past."

Jungkook chuckles as he noses the dip of Taehyung's neck, closing his eyes. "You have."

"I'll catch you again."

Jungkook's voice darkens, yet remains laced with tenderness, a divinity's command, a vow drawn from his devotee. "You must."

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: have faith in me, AND there is no actual mcd no matter how doomed shit may seem, I must also mention that slb IS ✨happy ending✨ as stated in the tags 🥸 Some of you still worry about it XDD My stories will never have a sad ending so don't worry about that hehe 🤍

On a side note, the scene that starts where Jungkook finds Taehyung in the bathroom is I think my favorite one that I've worked on in the whole story idk why?? It was just a very raw moment for them and I was crying writing it and feeling all their emotions 😭

The title for CH30:

'The Spring Pulse'

I will see you soon for it 👀 I hope you enjoyed this chapter and thank you for reading it and your comments on the previous chapter 🫂🤍 As for the gifts for SLB, more were done and I will be adding them in the endnotes of CH30 (there isn't enough max characters because of the length of the links and formatting to add links on ao3 😒)

🎁 Lovely gift time made my SLB lovely readers Part II💛🎁

❧ Art of Taekook in the bathing scene made by artwcloud
❧ Taekook art of the scenting scene made by bbuntokki
❧ Art of Taekook feat tsundere Taehyung made by sunkjjk
❧ Art of Taehyung and whipped chibi Jungkook made by _yourosewei_

❧ Art of Jungkook, Taehyung and Revna made by bnnyk00
❧ A second art of Jungkook, Taehyung and Revna T____T made by bnnyk00

❧ Art of Jungkook and his necromancy along with Revna made by Mosy96
❧ Art of Jungkook and a skeleton hand made by sunkjjk
❧ Art of Jungkook and Revna made by dais_iys
❧ Art of Jungkook and his necromancy feat Revna made by hobisunshinebb
❧ Art of Revna and Jungkook made by _yourosewei_
❧ Art of Jungkook wearing the jacket Taehyung offered him + Revna made by HidingAway311
❧ Art of Jungkook, Prince of Amaris made by xryuuseix
❧ Art of Jungkook and the goblet made by sunkjjk
❧ Drawing of Jungkook and ✨bread✨ made by kirbykooo

❧ Art of Jungkook wearing jewelry made from Taehyung's blood (there was a bit of a brainrot in the SLB Twitter Community about Taehyung making rubies from his blood with his hemomancy after the whole blood scene between Taekook in this chapter XDDD) made by KDrawzzz
❧ Art of Jungkook wearing a dress AND Taehyung's rubies made by KDrawzzz
❧ Concept art of if Kaiya had a "human" form made by KDrawzzz

Chapter 30: The Spring Pulse

Chapter Summary

The spring pulse happens, and new developments begin.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy the chapter!!🤍

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is he dying?”

Minsoo hunches forward atop the balcony. He and Jungkook had climbed upstairs in a vacant room at the latter’s request. Although ‘order’ would have been more accurate if the steeled, biting demand had been any indication.

“Yes and no,” Minsoo answers. “Mostly no.”

“Explain.”

Minsoo shuffles on his spot to turn around and lean backward against the railing. He uses that moment to also create more distance between himself and Jungkook. He hasn’t experienced this feeling in a while, the kind that translates in a shivering cold sweat on his spine that prickles the hair at the back of his neck.

“As he said, as long as the plague is contained in his breath pouch, none of his organs will really be wounded. At least nothing that a healer or some healing potion won’t be able to treat,” Minsoo adds in spite of his better judgment, but he also knows better than to give a half truth to the Prince. “What’s dying is his arcane.”

“And if he loses each one of his breaths?”

Minsoo does not answer.

“He would be dying then, correct?”

“Maybe.”

“A ‘maybe’ does not suffice, Minsoo.”

Minsoo clenches and relaxes his fists a few times until the trembles abate. He hopes few or no dead are present in Jungkook’s garden. “It’s hard to say,” he eventually replies. “He’s fine for now, physical health wise. It’s his soul that should worry you more.”

Jungkook hums a raspy, callous chuckle. He's crying, a slump in his shoulders. "You will keep me informed about the impact of the plague on him and anything else related to his health. I want to know every single detail about it, no matter how gruesome or personal it may be, especially when I am not around to see it myself. If he vomits his own blood and organs, you tell me. If his breaths die, you tell me. If he's dying, you tell me. You tell me everything. Do you understand, Minsoo?"

Minsoo shoves down the instinctual impulse to oppose Jungkook's — *a human's* — demand. Instead, he nods. He knows he wouldn't dare not follow through with the request anyway.

"If I learn that you, Hyuna or someone else has kept from me something regarding Taehyung's health, I'll— I will…"

Minsoo doesn't know Jungkook very well, however even for him, it is easy to tell that fear is not the reason why Jungkook's hand trembles when it raises to his face. Jungkook's gaze is a reflection of the sky, obscured with darkened clouds looming over all.

"We still don't know who or what has caused the plague, correct?"

"We don't."

Jungkook emits a brief hum. "If by any chance you know first through Elder Miseon or someone else, I must be the next one to know."

"To expunge what has caused the plague?"

Minsoo and Jungkook's gaze collide.

"Taehyung will not die for as long as I'm alive."

Jungkook leaves on those last words.

The air is less stifling after the departure.

Minsoo heaves a deep sigh. He startles when someone drops on the balcony from the roof. "Firecracker."

Dahee tumbles against Minsoo's chest, and she breaks into tears on his shoulder. He wraps his arms around her and lets her cry, holding her tighter whenever she sharply inhales in-between two sobs.

"What am I to do? One of my sons is dying. I'm scared, Dad. I'm so scared."

"I know, Firecracker. Everything will be alright, yeah? The kid is strong. We are too. Jungkook is as well."

"I worry about him."

"Jungkook?"

"I heard your conversation with him. He frightens me, the same way Taehyung used to, sometimes still does."

"Yeah," Minsoo agrees, peering at the door Jungkook has left ajar. "I get that." Dahee emits a feeble chuckle. "But a certainty we can hold onto is that they won't let the other die. No matter the

cost.”

Dahee nods. “Yes. Neither will we.”

The door opens. The ache in Taehyung’s chest lessens when he recognizes the footsteps, trailed by a grim, fresh scent. Floral death. He immediately welcomes Jungkook within his grasp when the latter slides beneath the blankets.

Jungkook falls into tears tonight once more.

Taehyung embraces him tightly, and when it doesn’t suffice, Taehyung drags his nose along Jungkook's neck and throat, scenting him to soothe his Prince’s cries.

It works after a while, thankfully, enough for Jungkook to speak.

“I need to shower,” he whispers.

“It can wait tomorrow. Or later.”

“I don’t want to shower. Or bathe. I don’t like our bathroom anymore.”

The guilt seers anew, wrenching Taehyung’s heart. “I’ll figure it out. I'd been thinking about something regarding the house, actually. We’ll talk about this soon, and I’ll show you.”

“‘kay.”

“In the meantime, we can get a tub and put it in a place you find more comfortable. Do you have any ideas?”

“Not in the bedroom.”

“What about the solarium? It’s shielded enough to give us privacy, but it’s still outside, where you can feel the air, smell the grass, bask in the sun.”

“Oh… That’s…” Jungkook leans back. His eyes are red when they settle on Taehyung. He cups Taehyung’s face with a tender palm. “Would you like it too?”

“Yeah. I’m not very fond of that bathroom either.”

“That’d be nice, then. We could put your things in the kitchen in the meantime. Mine too. Are there pipes in the solarium? It might be bothersome to—”

“It’s fine. I’ll handle it, hm? Plus Minsoo is a good plumber, and my father will help.”

“S’good,” Jungkook nods before nuzzling his face in the dip of Taehyung’s shoulder. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be. We’re seeing to it.”

In the end, the bathtub being paced somewhere else does not work. Jungkook had tried to settle in it before any pipes had been installed, however he had said that it does not feel like anything has changed. So, with the help of Jimin, Junhyun and Minsoo to speed up the process, Taehyung has opted to build for Jungkook what the latter had once jokingly requested.

The hot spring is shielded from prying eyes with a pergola and curtains that are hooked in the ground. The pipe system functions perfectly, and best of all, Jungkook loves it.

When Jungkook had first tried it, Taehyung had also taken this time to entirely migrate their bathroom belongings, part of it stored outside near the hot spring, the other neatly arranged in the solarium on a vanity dresser his mother had given to him. It had taken a while to tidy up everything, but it had been therapeutic for Taehyung, and he had been rewarded with a bright smile and a peck on the cheek from Jungkook.

Jungkook has been crying a lot.

It doesn't surprise Taehyung at all, and he expects it to be like this for weeks and perhaps even months, however as more days pass, the tears begin to stop. They still haphazardly happen here and there, catching both of them off guard sometimes, but Taehyung can see it: the way something settles deep within Jungkook.

Perhaps this comforting fear Jungkook had mentioned.

This noon, after having spent the major part of the morning reading more about dragonborns and Elders' history, Jungkook has mumbled about starving and has decided to try to replicate the recipe Taehyung had shown him. Jungkook's eyes are still faintly puffy, but there's a disgruntled pout pursing his lips that Taehyung smiles at.

"Why is it not looking the way it did with you?"

"You forgot the egg yolks."

"Oh. Right." Jungkook's gaze drifts on Taehyung, his chin jutting up. "You could have reminded me."

"Apologies, my Prince, however you shunned me out of the house the moment I dared help you."

"Shut up," Jungkook chuckles. The curl of his lips turns playful. "You know…"

"Hm?"

"You called me 'gem' again."

Taehyung blinks a few times then frowns. "I haven't?"

"You did. Once."

"When?"

“The night you told me.”

Taehyung had?

“You said, and I quote: *‘We'll find a solution for everything, and if not, we'll create it ourselves, isn't that right, Gem?’”*

Warmth slowly fills up Taehyung’s face. He coughs to hide his embarrassment. “I mean… S’whatever.” He peers at the letter in his hands to distract both himself and Jungkook who turns around. Taehyung summons a thin band of his wind breath at the tip of his index to cut the envelope. The breath cuts through his skin instead of the paper.

“You’re alright?”

“Yeah. Accidentally cut myself.” Taehyung stares at the back of Jungkook’s head. “How did you know?”

Jungkook shrugs. “I’m not sure.” He peers at Taehyung over his shoulder. “I felt your wind breath?”

“The door hasn’t really closed.”

“Yes, I believe so. I hope it never does.”

Taehyung says nothing but smiles to himself.

Taehyung’s gaze drifts across the group installed in the living room of his parents’ house. It settles on Jungkook when the latter sits down on the armrest of the couch Taehyung occupies.

“So,” Jungkook starts, “what kind of preparations can be made for the spring pulse?”

Dahee sighs.

“None,” Elder Miseon answers with a sheepish smile. “We will simply gather somewhere in order to watch over Taehyung’s state and administer any needed healing. That is all. If either of us is targeted by the plague, there will be nothing to be done.”

“I don’t have any necromancy anymore, or at least none that I can access. Even if Taehyung believes that he feels my arcane, I’m pretty certain that what he's sensing is the remnant of what had happened in Kaiya. Nothing more.”

“I need to verify myself too.” Yoongi pulls out of his book some kind of intricate sphere of ink whose rings rotate around each other. He hands it to Jungkook. “I’ve been waiting to check your arcane with this new contraption I've made. It’s similar to the ring we’ve used before. Just hold it and walk to the end of the room.”

Jungkook does albeit with some hesitancy after removing any arcanic object from him like Revna’s ruby. He pokes at one of the sphere’s rings. The sphere liquefies into a pool on the ground moments

later then makes its way inside Yoongi's book that closes.

Yoongi swings the book open. Ink covers his palm. It steadily drips onto the double pages, soon forming letters, then words. “Huh?”

“What is it?” Jungkook wonders and rushes toward Yoongi.

“It’s saying that only one ancient arcane has been detected, but you have three according to the amount of sigils you have? And to the previous results that had been found with the ring. The lethality is unknown.”

“This is odd,” Jungkook hums and settles down next to Yoongi.

“So you may have lost two aspects of your arcane?” Namjoon inquires.

“I haven’t been able to see any lost souls, let alone help one pass, but I also haven’t been able to raise the bunny we'd caught on the trip back from Kaiya.”

“Perhaps the other two aspects have become two small to be detected. If they’re weak or barely present, they could go unnoticed by my arcane,” Yoongi muses.

“I personally believe Jungkook’s necromancy is simply mutating,” Junhyun says, “that it is in some kind of chrysalis waiting to be opened into whatever butterfly may come out of it."

“Taehyung,” Yoongi starts and glances at him, “can you try it as well?”

Taehyung takes the sphere from Yoongi. It feels cold between his fingers, and he watches how the ink sticks to his skin without leaving any smudge. What happens next follows the same pattern it had with Jungkook. Once done, Taehyung stands behind the couch Yoongi and Jungkook occupy, then he leans forward on the backrest.

Jungkook jerks away from the book. “No!”

Taehyung glances down at him. “What is wrong with you.”

Jungkook reclines his head against Taehyung’s shoulder. “I almost saw what your last breath is,” he mumbles through a pout. “I want to figure it out myself.”

Taehyung huffs. “You can’t.”

“Yes I can.”

“There’s no way you or anyone else can unless I tell them.”

“You’re lying.”

“It’s been right in front of you and you never saw it.”

Jimin’s brows fly up his forehead. “Wait, really? You made one?”

“Oh… That is surprising,” Dahee says, echoing Jimin’s shock. “You were quite taken by Jungkook even back then, hm?”

Taehyung wrinkles his nose. “I was not. Just made sense to make one, and I knew that I could add the rest of my breaths like this.”

“Make what!” Jungkook swivels around to glare at Taehyung.

“You’re wearing my last breath. You have been since the wedding.”

Jungkook’s eyes narrow. He peers at the wedding pendant but promptly discards it. His gaze then settles on his wedding ring. His frown deepens as he lifts his hand to survey the miniature storm within the gem. “But… It’s your other breaths in the diamond.”

“I know.” Taehyung can nearly see the cogwheels turn in Jungkook’s mind. He smiles when a gasp tumbles out of Jungkook’s mouth.

“Is it the diamond?” Jungkook exclaims. He gasps a second time when Taehyung nods in confirmation. “How was I supposed to guess that!”

“I told you. You can't. But you’re more stubborn than a hydra,” Taehyung retorts and earns himself a pinch on the arm.

“You can create diamonds?” Hoseok wonders.

“Only in my dragon form. It’s highly taxing and makes it impossible for me to use any other breath since my breath pouch becomes some kind of cocoon for the creation of the diamond. Worst of all, it can take ages. As in *days* to make one single tiny diamond. This breath is fucking useless. It’s not even good enough to be used for trading coins,” Taehyung shrugs. “In 10 days I’d make more money selling my hunts than incapacitating and making myself vulnerable to make one diamond.”

“Why you never told us,” Hoseok pouts, arms crossed over his chest.

“‘Cause I never use it. Last time was for his ring.” Taehyung nods toward Jungkook. “And before that I hadn’t used that breath for over a decade probably.” It had also been an accord between Taehyung and his family to keep this between the four of them. It hadn't been a highly secretive breath like his hemomancy, but Dahee, as well as the gem island’s leader, had judged it better to keep it hushed to avoid any potential problem.

“Taehyung,” Jungkook starts, “is Dohyun aware of it?”

“I think so? Jongsuk knew about it.”

“Has he ever made you sell them?” Yoongi asks next, a certain sympathy swimming in his gaze.

Taehyung shakes his head. “The man with the scent must have known about the limits of this breath, and he obviously couldn’t afford to let me be in my dragon form, let alone alter the runes to allow me to use a second breath. Plus the diamonds would have been worthless.”

“How so?”

“My wings and their scales were selling for more than any diamond I could make.” The declaration drops a cold bucket in the room that Taehyung immediately tries to lessen. “Anyway. You’re wearing my diamond, and now you know.”

Jungkook's lips curl upward around a pleased chuckle. "You made a diamond for me," he says ever so softly.

Jungkook looks so content that Taehyung doesn't have the heart to tell him that he had spent as little time as possible to make the diamond, and that he had done so to save himself from paying full price for a proper gem. "How will you repay me for this?"

"With nothing because I know you made it yourself to save your money."

Taehyung opens then closes his mouth as laughter erupts around him. "Right…"

Jungkook chuckles too before pecking Taehyung's cheek. "Thank you nonetheless. Would you make more diamonds for me to wear?"

Anything.

"Yeah," Taehyung wisely chooses to answer.

"Going back to the results," Yoongi begins, drawing the attention to him again, "there's an ancient arcane in Taehyung. Most likely the plague?"

"There wasn't any when I used your book, nor when we used a page from it when Jungkook and I had visited Hyuna for the first time," Taehyung muses.

"The plague didn't really have an effect on you at the time," Yoongi says. "It must have been too small of a seed for my arcane to detect the plague in you."

"We've at least confirmed that Jungkook's arcane is still present, and that the plague *can* be detected if it has grown enough in whoever has it." Dahee continues. "We could perhaps visit Cahira and Donovan to inquire about Taehyung and Jungkook's gifts. They may have unearthed some answers while we were away."

A groan welcomes Taehyung, Jungkook and Elder Miseon.

"Why must you come here again."

"A pleasure to see you as well, Cahira," Elder Miseon greets.

Cahira waves her off as she walks inside her house, the small group trailing after her. "There are less of you."

"More of us were not needed," Elder Miseon answers. "We wanted to briefly discuss with you."

"And *why* must everyone come to me to seek answers? I live in this forest for a reason, one of them being the peaceful solitude it grants me."

"And the fact that you do not have a choice," Elder Miseon teases then conceals her smile behind a hand when Cahira glowers at her.

“Who else was with Woosung?”

“A couple of warlocks, a few more dragonborns and humans. One of the humans seemed to act as the leader of the group. He was cordial, but something had bothered me about him. His name was Dojun? Dohae?”

“Dohyun?”

“That one.”

Something sharp and frigid sinks within Taehyung’s chest.

Jungkook's gaze hardens, meeting Cahira’s watchful one who takes a step back and turns to face him.”Is he alive?”

“Yes, although some members of his group have died during their Night Terrors.”

“Has he received a gift?”

“Yes, however I don’t know what,” Cahira answers, her shoulder drawn tight. “He has lost an eye, and he had seemed exceedingly distraught when he had left.”

“Why would he come here?”

“Desperation or greed. People who visit Kaiya fall in either of those two categories. I suppose Woosung had told him about Kaiya’s gifts and how advantageous they—"

“He may know I have the plague,” Taehyung cuts in. “Even if there’s no way for him to have known yet. Only Minsoo, Hyuna and—”

“Elders…” Elder Miseon’s eyes are wide, soon hidden by a palm that she drags down her face, her lips pinched into a thin line.

Taehyung’s gaze darts on her. “You told him?”

“No, but… I had shared this knowledge with Woosung.”

Taehyung’s teeth grit together. “Why?”

“Because I had thought that I could trust him with this. I was trying to plead for your case, and have him remove the seal on your hemomancy. I still am. I thought he would agree if he were to know how unprecedented your case is for the plague, and he had, to some extent. He had told me that—”

“You should have fucking told me. You should have *asked* me first. It was not your knowledge to spread.”

“Only God knows what Dohyun will do with that information, and now with his gift,” Jungkook snips.

“My apologies. I had not… thought. I trusted Woosung to keep such sensitive and personal information to himself, as the Council's mediator. I do not understand why he would have—”

“Because he must have made a deal with Dohyun.” Jungkook marches toward Elder Miseon, however Taehyung halts him by grabbing the back of his coat. “Even someone like Woosung would betray us or you if it means helping his own daughter. Dohyun must have promised *something* to Woosung.”

Elder Miseon’s head lowers. “My deepest apologies, Taehyung.”

“S’whatever,” Taehyung rasps and lets go of Jungkook. His hands ball into fists in his pants’ pockets. “He was bound to be aware of this at some point, knowing him.”

“God… Everything keeps worsening every day.”

Taehyung lightly pulls on the hoop adorning Jungkook’s ear. “It’ll get better, hm?”

Jungkook huffs.

Taehyung quirks a brow to which Jungkook rolls his eyes at. “Brat.”

Jungkook draws a small smile.

“Quite the history with this man,” Cahira chirps from where she’s lounging on a chair.

“It’s a long story,” Taehyung dismisses. He won’t speak his thoughts out loud yet, however a part of him believes that Dohyun knowing he has the plague isn’t the worst outcome that could have happened. If there is an aspect of him that Taehyung can be certain of, it’s that the man will try his damnedest to keep his dove alive.

“You don’t seem surprised about Taehyung,” Jungkook notes with a glance at Cahira. “You knew.”

“Wasn’t difficult to guess.”

Jungkook peers at Taehyung. “What did you both speak about before we left?”

“She was telling me that the reason why I had become some kind of vessel for the dragon soul you hear may have been because we share one thing in common: the plague. I could feel some of the pain that soul was going through. It felt familiar. Cahira thinks it’s something we could capitalize on.”

“You weren’t a simple vessel. You were affected by them,” Jungkook retorts, exactly how Taehyung would have expected him to, something he had told Cahira who now sighs to herself. “They were hurting you.”

“They may be of aid for the plague if we find a way to communicate with them through you and I.”

“I suppose,” Jungkook mutters. “I haven’t manifested my necromancy again, so we can’t do anything for now anyway.”

“You have not?” Cahira frowns. After Jungkook has shaken his head in answer, Cahira leaves the house to come back moments later with the same two glass flowers Donovan had used on them. “Do the same as before.”

Taehyung is the first one to execute. The results are fairly similar to those of their first visit, to his relief. However when it comes to Jungkook’s turn, the flower glass remains the same, neither

imploding, eroding nor melting.

Cahira pensively hums as she peers at Jungkook while stroking her long braid.

“A warlock’s arcane cannot simply disappear like this,” Cahira says. “It may be a chrysalis.”

“Is there anything you can help with?”

“I have no control nor knowledge about most gifts Kaiya awards its visitors with, however the gift Kaiya has given you was unique, born from gratitude. There is no reason to fear it. Kaiya appears fond of you,” Cahira adds as she watches the way a wind carrying leaves curls around Jungkook’s form then pokes his forehead.

“Have you uncovered anything regarding the plague so far?” Elder Miseon wonders.

“Unfortunately not. It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack here. I’ve also been trying to remember my life before I became Kaiya’s guardian, however as I told you, most of my memories are gone.”

Taehyung and Jungkook both heave a sigh.

“If all you’ve come to do here is sigh and be a nuisance, leave. However, keep me informed about the plague’s spring pulse. I worry it may affect Donovan or I.”

“Will do.”

“Will we have another gift?” Jungkook wonders with palpable excitement.

The gifts end up being another pie for Elder Miseon, a pastry for Taehyung, and a chocolate candy for Jungkook. Taehyung had expected something a tad more exciting, but he, for once, welcomes the peacefulness of normalcy.

After leaving Kaiya, Taehyung and Jungkook had flown to attend a meeting with the Council where the news of Taehyung being afflicted by the plague had been shared. The meeting had not been very fruitful, a certain tenseness draped over the leaders due to the incoming plague pulse. Most have chosen to remain with their families during this time and agreed on another reuniting date after the pulse.

It’s once every leader has vacated the room, now only Woosung, Dahee and Jungkook left that Taehyung speaks.

“You’ve betrayed me a second time.”

Woosung frowns, visibly confused. However his eyes widen moments later then drift to the side. “I —”

“You’ve told the man with the scent.”

“I did not think that—”

“Yes. You have not. At all,” Jungkook interjects, his cold gaze riveted on Woosung.

Woosung shrugs off his cloak, displaying his wrinkled shirt that does nothing to aid his unkempt state: his face looks weary, the skin pale yet darkened by dark circles beneath his eyes. “Dohyun has shared a lot of verified information with us. He has cultivated many connections that have proven themselves useful many times. I simply thought that… That I could trade assistance and knowledge with him, in order to aid my daughter.”

Jungkook scoffs. “And you believed him?”

“I understand your distrust, howe—”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you threw me to the vulture. Again.”

“You would do the same for your own kin.” Woosung’s callous gaze softens when his daughter nudges his shoulder. “I’ve been looking for a way to undo her predicament. However I have never found anything, but I believe that Dohyun’s connections, especially with Eden, may be useful for me. He told me as such not long ago.”

“She’s a basilisk, isn’t she?”

Woosung stills. He curtly nods. “Cursed by a warlock.”

“Why?”

“I cannot say. It is none of your concern.”

“Neither was it of yours to tell Dohyun about Taehyung, yet here we are,” Jungkook counters.

Woosung's lips open and close around naught. He exhales then says "She was deemed as too powerful. Too dangerous and unstable. You, yourself, have been witness to her breaths and their potency. Even now. It is only a sliver compared to what they would truly be if it hadn't been for the curse."

"Who has deemed her too dangerous?" Dahee asks. "The Council?"

"No… I did." Woosung drops down on a chair, a slump to his shoulder. "I was… I was scared of her, of what she may do, of what may become of her once words would spread among dragonborns, warlocks and humans about her arcane."

Taehyung glances at his mother.

There's a look of understanding that smooths out the frown etching her brows.

Taehyung averts his gaze.

"I had thought that with the help of some warlocks, I could limit some parts of her arcane, or keep some of her breaths at bay. I had thought I could trust these warlocks, but they—" Woosung's jaws grit together. "They had inflicted a curse upon her, and turned her into what she is now." He extends a hand toward her. "You can show them."

His daughter scrapes her forehead with a talon, sending some feathers to fly back in the pool. A white sigil appears on her head when she lowers her talon.

Taehyung surveys Jungkook. “It’s similar to Lovely’s.”

“Whose?”

Jungkook visibly debates on his answer. “We have a basilisk,” he eventually explains. Woosung springs up. “She was cursed as well, most likely as a child. She does not retain any memories from her past nor—”

Woosung marches toward Jungkook and seizes his wrist. “What else do you know? When was she cursed? Do you know by whom?” He presses a frozen Jungkook. “You must tell me! Is she—”

Taehyung yanks Woosung away from Jungkook. “I hope for you there isn’t a single mark on him.”

“I must know! I—I’ve never found another basilisk. I always thought my daughter was the sole o —”

Taehyung pulls Woosung’s face closer to his own then rasps “Do not touch him again, Woosung. Is that clear?”

Woosung gulps. He nods before uttering some rushed apologies to Jungkook when Taehyung releases him.

Taehyung watches the way Jungkook’s trembling fingers fold behind his back. They rub at his unblemished wrist in mechanical motions.

There’s a tick in the muscles of Taehyung’s jaws.

Before he can do or say anything reckless, his mother speaks.

“We have yet to uncover the identity of these warlocks, nor the reason why they would subject a child to such a curse. All we know is that she is like you and I.”

“A dragonborn?”

“Yes.”

Taehyung carefully slings a hand between Jungkook’s. He relaxes the tense fingers there, rubbing patterns on the inner wrist that he holds. “You’re with me, hm?” He allows his wind to seep out of his mouth and touch Jungkook’s temple. “Can feel the wind.”

Jungkook nods. “Yes.” He peers at Taehyung before leaning against him.

“For how long has she been a basilisk?”

“A while," Taehyung answers. "Her arcane and curse are ancient.”

“I see.” Woosung reclines atop the table. “I assume you have yet to find a way to free her from the curse?”

“We were hoping to find some answers through you and your daughter,” Dahee continues. Woosung shakes his head. “Has she lost her memories after being cursed?”

“Indeed. A lot of them had been erased by the spell. She still remembers me and a few older memories, however she has forgotten much of her past.”

“There’s a matter related to this we’d like to investigate.” Taehyung retrieves a raven nix from his pouch. He presents it to Woosung’s daughter. “Can you eat this?”

“Why?” Woosung warily questions.

“Lovely has been reacting strangely to raven nixes. We don’t know why, so we’d like to see if the raven bells have the same effect on your daughter.”

Woosung’s gaze darts between Taehyung and his daughter. It’s at his approval that his daughter’s head lowers in Taehyung’s palm, her snout cold. She promptly eats the bell.

“Do you feel sleepy?” Taehyung asks. The dragon shakes her head. “Tell us if she has any nightmares, or if she uncovers lost memories.”

“Is it what has been occurring with this ‘Lovely’ you speak of?”

“Perhaps. The raven bells may be a key to the curse.”

“I will monitor my daughter’s state and warn you of any change, or lack of.”

“How old is she?” Jungkook questions next.

“She was 14 years old when she was cursed, however it had happened years ago, and she does not seem to have mentally aged at all since then,” Woosung replies. “How old is Lovely?”

“We don’t know for certain.” Jungkook loops an arm around Taehyung’s as he straightens up. “We estimated her to be 8 or 9 years old, but she may be younger than this.”

“By the Elders…” Woosung rubs the tip of his fingers between his brows. “How could anyone inflict such a violent curse upon a child.”

“Haven’t you done the same to your daughter?” Jungkook *and* Dahee both speak at the same time.

Taehyung coughs to hide his noise of amusement at the sharp jab.

Woosung’s lips pinch into a thin line, his gaze cast low.

“What’s her name?”

“Neige,” Woosung answers Jungkook after a beat of silence. Neige's tail wags behind her when her name is called.

“Why keep it secret?”

“There is some unfinished business in the West due to her curse. She had to flee this place and come live with me after her mother passed away,” Woosung explains. “If I may be bold enough to ask, keep her name to yourself, please. I do not wish for her to be found.”

“On one condition,” Dahee smiles. “Remove the seal on my son’s hemomancy.”

“Elder Miseon had requested the same, however it is not possible. The vow was taken, and my daughter cannot remove it. She doesn’t know how.”

Remembrances of the seal wavering after Jungkook’s flame had entered Taehyung’s chest flicker in Taehyung’s mind. “Could it be removed through external means?”

“I suppose so,” Woosung muses. “It would however require an arcane more potent than Neige’s, or something that can erase arcane in some ways.”

Jungkook groans. “I want my necromancy back… I feel empty without it.”

“We’ll figure it out. I promise,” Taehyung assures before surveying Woosung. “Your daughter’s name is safe with us.”

Woosung heaves a relieved sigh. “Thank you. I… Thank you. My apologies for speaking of your personal matters with Dohyun. It was a thoughtless decision I will not repeat.”

Taehyung disregards the apology with a hum, busy observing the way Jungkook extends a hand toward Neige.

Neige props her chin into his palm, tilting her head to the side. Jungkook smiles and lets go of Taehyung to graze her snout. “You have a beautiful name, Neige.” Neige’s rear wobbles from side to side, her tail wagging faster. The feathers on her back ruffle when she shakes her wings. "I hope to properly meet you one day."

Taehyung and Jungkook bid their goodbye after this.

Dahee, on the other hand, decides to remain behind for a while longer. Taehyung nods, aware of what the two parents will discuss.

When Taehyung and Jungkook are home, they both immediately check up on Revna.

She mentions having had a nightmare with the ‘mean voices’ before settling back in her small bed. She’s fast asleep on her back moments later.

Later that night, they both take a quick bath, then lay down in their bed.

“I don’t think I can sleep tonight,” Jungkook whispers.

“Me either.”

Jungkook shuffles in Taehyung’s embrace to face him, the room dark around them. “There may be no more breaths of yours in my wedding ring tomorrow.”

“They won’t disappear.”

“They might, Taehyung.”

Taehyung’s palm drifts beneath the shirt, needing to feel Jungkook’s skin against his own. He lets his hand slowly walk a slow path along Jungkook’s spine, up until it halts at the nape that it cradles.

Jungkook sighs, tucking his face closer to Taehyung. “If you go—”

“Jungkook, it—”

“Will you wait for me?”

The air feels stifled. The sting in Taehyung’s eyes only abates when a tear slips past the bridge of his nose. “Yes… I will.”

The tension in Jungkook’s form vanishes at those few words.

He falls asleep seconds later.

Taehyung remains awake the whole night.

Jungkook peers at the field of grass that endlessly stretches along the horizon.

The group present today is large, consisting of Taehyung and Jungkook's families, as well as Woosung, Miseon and two other members of the Council, mainly the healer Nara and the dragonborn lady with the gems called Minjun. Yumi is here too, as per Jungkook's request, perched on her boulder familiar.

"My angel," Hyuna greets Jungkook and pulls him into a hug when she arrives with Hoseok. "I have missed you, dear." She cups his face. "How are you faring?"

"I'm well," Jungkook smiles. "It's nice to see you." A faint crack trailed by the sounds of metal grinding against metal elevates in the air. He glances at her prosthetic arm. "How are you?"

"Good. I've been mastering the art of sawing as of late, a hobby a certain dragonborn has forced me into."

"It's to train the motricity of your new arm," Hoseok grumbles.

Hyuna waves him off. "Whatever you say." She chuckles to herself when Hoseok rolls his eyes.

Jungkook tilts his head back to survey the sky.

The sun is bright and warm on his skin, abating the ambient cold that still seeps through his bones. When his gaze lowers, it falls on the sun-kissed skin of Taehyung's naked arms, only a black tank top draped over his chest.

Minsoo, Nara, and soon Hyuna begin to perform a series of spells and breaths that they cast upon Taehyung. Some are protective: like the trio of plants Hyuna prompts Taehyung to drink and eat, said to improve healing as well as coat some kind of layer of shield around his organs. Others are made to enhance Taehyung: strengthen his breath pouch, more particularly, like the pink pomade Nara rubs between Taehyung's pectorals.

Then there's Minsoo, who downs an entire bottle of a golden mix concoction before smacking a hand between Taehyung's shoulder blades and breathing out some forest green air that is seemingly absorbed by Taehyung for the next few minutes. Minsoo walks toward his daughter and he evidently wants to do the same for her, but Dahee denies it with a shake of her head and a raised hand.

It would be pointless, after all. The plague has no cure.

Jungkook catches the way Woosung's gaze darts on the two scars marring Taehyung's back. It drifts aside in shame not long after.

As it should, Jungkook thinks.

A new face is present.

An Elder, to be precise.

Miseon had introduced him as some kind of ‘exceptional healer’, to quote her. He looks fairly young for an Elder, perhaps in his late 40s. He has long black hair that cascades down to his knees, an echo of the unusual name the man bears.

"I’m done," Hyuna sighs and wipes some sweat off her brows. "You may carry on, Ichor."

Ichor forms a ring in front of his mouth with his thumb and index fingers. A translucent sphere bubbles out when he breathes through the ring that soon gains in color. The bubble shines with iridescent, golden hues that nearly glimmer. More bubbles join the first, some larger, others smaller, all varying in colors. Each has some sort of thread dangling at the bottom that Ichor attaches on different parts of Taehyung’s body.

“What are these?” Namjoon wonders with palpable awe.

“Monitors,” is all that Ichor says.

“Will they keep him safe?” Jungkook asks next.

“No,” Ichor answers. “The plague’s arcane is too potent.”

Jungkook can’t repress the sardonic curl to his lips. “And what is it that the Elders can ever do to protect the peers they supposedly cherish?”

Ichor’s dark eyes slowly drift on Jungkook. He lets go of a thread linking Taehyung and a bubble together with an elegant flick of his fingers. His steps are measured and graceful, so much so that it seems as though the man glides across the ground rather than walk.

He halts before Jungkook.

Ichor is nearly two heads taller, yet he does not bother lolling his chin down when he peers at Jungkook.

Jungkook, on the other hand, has no care for such frivolous tokens of arrogance. He tilts his head back to meet the man’s gaze.

“What is your name?”

“Jeon Jungkook.”

Ichor emits a sound that is half a chuckle, half a snide hum. With two fingers, he taps his mouth where a small, blue bubble slips out of. It bursts into a dust that disperses around after pinching it. “Ah." He noses at the air. "A warlock.” He rubs some of the dust between his fingers then says “Your kind used to be more docile, in my time.”

"Docile?”

“'Cowardly' is another word. Very few warlocks had the chance to meet an Elder, let alone live to recount a fictitious tale.”

Jungkook bites back the retorts Seohyung would have no qualms in professing. “I assume this must have occurred after the Great War.”

“Before. After. Still. You must be proud of what your dynasty has achieved, Jeon Jungkook. Of the empire you will preside, forged through the blood of my kin.” Ichor’s head tilts to the side. The angular, sharp angles of his slender face are darkened by the curtains of his hair, but also by the gaze swimming with displeasure that he levels Jungkook with. “Warlocks are born dastards, the first to forsake any loyalty they may have nursed for a loved one.”

“You seem to be quite the knowledgeable historian, Elder Ichor. Perhaps you could confirm or deny this to me.” Jungkook steps closer to the man and says “Were the stories recounted of a time before the Great War where dragonborns would sacrifice humans and even their own kind also fictitious tales?” He contentedly observes the tick in Ichor’s jaw. “Would you not consider this as dastardly as well? Tossing innocents in the mouth of a mountain in the hopes of appeasing a wrathful deity supposedly living there. Perhaps you were an active participant in these deaths, in your time.”

“Jungkook,” Miseon snaps, her glare born onto him. “I understand your anger, however you must address Elder Ichor with the respect he is owed.”

“So must Elder Ichor with Jungkook,” Dahee sharply intervenes. “Jungkook is an esteemed member of our Council. He—”

“Enough,” Ichor interjects with a flippant motion of his hand.

“Your kind has been dying for *years.* You, a so-called exceptional healer, have not been able to figure out *anything* about this fatal sickness,” Jungkook continues, driving his attention back to the core of his ire. “Why?”

“Your husband dying from the plague is not my sin. If he were to die on this very day, I still would not be the cause of it. It would do you well to remember this, Jeon Jungkook. One should not aim their wrath at those aiding them.” The tone of Ichor’s voice is akin to the one of a parent reprimanding a disobeying child: exasperated and dismissive.

Jungkook can’t refrain himself from scoffing this time. “I was told this plague has been going on at full capacity for 13 years. That it has been existing for much longer. For centuries. Yet I’m supposed to believe that you, Miseon or any other Elder for that matter have never unearthed a piece of information about it?”

“The plague is ancient. Much, if not nearly all, has been lost during the Great War,” Miseon ripostes.

“I still find it odd, Elder Miseon,” Jungkook carries on with barely contained disdain. “How could dragonborns as ancient as Elders, some of whom have lived through the Great War, not know a single thing about how the plague has come to be? It begs the question of how honest Elders are, does it not? It wouldn’t surprise me if some of you *know* a thing or two, but choose to conveniently keep it to themselves, whether it be out of fear, cowardice, or God knows what else.” His gaze whirls back on Ichor. “My ire knows who it is aimed at.”

Ichor sighs. “Cures cannot be made as effortlessly as you believe them to be."

“Yet your Oracle seems to believe Taehyung and I may play a part in finding or making a cure for the plague, if their insistence about our wedding and whatever obscure vision they may have seen is any hint. Why is that?”

“Even I am not privy to the Oracle’s visions or designs.”

Seokjin’s hands raise in the air in a placating manner. “Perhaps now is not the time to argue about this, Jungkook. The Elders strive to protect us, even if—”

“Yet they have failed you over and over and *over* again throughout history. They’re failing you now. They’re failing Taehyung who may die today,” Jungkook rasps. “You have been completely, utterly *useless.* A worthless worshiped entity that cannot save their own kind. Again. And this time my dynasty cannot be blamed for it.”

“Viper,” Taehyung calls out from afar. “C’mere. I can’t move with all this…” He waves at the bubbles and other arcanic spells and plants surrounding him.

Jungkook does so, not without one last glower at Miseon and Ichor.

It’s annoying, really, the way the anger simmering in his veins is alleviated by the tender hand that cards through his tousled locks.

“Everything’s alright, yeah?” Taehyung leans closer to Jungkook to bump his nose against Jungkook’s cheek. “We can fist fight the Elders after the pulse, how about that?”

Jungkook huffs. “Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“If there’s someone stubborn enough to defy death, it’s certainly you.”

“Me and my Prince of Death.”

Jungkook does his best to wash away the flush that warms his face at those words. Now is not the time to be flustered by flirtatious remarks that Taehyung does not even realize.

“You need to drink this,” Yoongi says and breaks the moment between the two. Taehyung downs the vial. “Hyuna and Yumi helped me make it yesterday.”

Taehyung grimaces. “Could have warned me before I drank it. Elders knows what I drank if *she* helped.”

Yumi grins from the spot she hasn’t left. She has been oddly quiet since her arrival in the field.

“What does it do?” Taehyung asks.

“It works similarly to the ring, but it'll only focus on your arcane,” Yoongi answers. “Don’t fucking die.”

“I don’t intend to.”

Jungkook takes out his pocket watch.

He reads the time.

It’s 11:57am.

The pulse will happen in 9 minutes.

“Are the preparations done?” Dahee wonders.

“Yeah.” Minsoo steps away from Taehyung, however still remaining close; Hyuna, Nara and Yoongi next to him.

Revna curls out of the ruby to drape over Jungkook’s shoulders. Her sigil is hidden, however Jungkook has an inkling it has been pointless to do so with Ichor. ***“I hope Taetae will be okay.”***

“Of course. I’m strong, aren’t I?”

“Yes!”

“Shouldn’t she be in the ruby?” Jimin worries.

“Revna is strong, and Revna don’t want to be in the ruby. Want to be with Kookie and Taetae…”

“Plus I don’t believe being in another dimension would keep her or anyone else safe from the plague. It hadn't for Kaiya’s guardian,” Miseon adds.

Some pieces of discussion carry on for a few minutes.

12:01 pm.

Taehyung hugs his family. Miseon and Woosung exchange smiles from where they stand near Ichor. Hoseok pulls Hyuna into his arms before letting go.

Neither Taehyung nor Jungkook make any motion to hug each other. Jungkook refuses to treat this moment as a potential farewell. They have decades to embrace one another regardless of what may happen today.

Taehyung is quite far from the group that gathers together.

He looks beautiful, hair flickering under the faint breeze, skin praised by the sun.

The pulsations of Jungkook’s heart begin to grow faster in spite of how eerily calm he feels.

12:03.

Jungkook nearly tells Taehyung, then.

The words balance on the tip of his tongue, ready to fall, but it isn't the right moment. And he has time, right? He has the time to tell Taehyung.

12:04.

Taehyung's gaze flits on Jungkook. His head is held high, his shoulders relaxed. A confident yet cheeky smile curves his lips when he presses two of his fingers against his mouth and sends a floating kiss that warms Jungkook’s forehead.

Jungkook smothers the voice telling him it might be the last one he receives from Taehyung.

12:05.

A plummet sinks within Jungkook. It dizzies him, but his feet are rooted on the ground, and he manages to remain upright. His vision blurs but it does not change when he blinks.

Jungkook wonders if he might pass out.

“Ten seconds,” Miseon announces.

10… 9… 8…

Jimin stands between Junhyun and Woobin.

People hold hands.

6… 5… 4…

Jungkook seizes the necrotic book Revna brings out of the ruby for him. He keeps it behind his back. He slowly inhales, exhales, then he stills.

Ready to vow.

12:06.

Nothing indicates that an arcanic plague has pulsed, nor that it has infected dragonborns and will take lives within days.

It’s serene, as every pulse must has been

The silence stretches and stretches some more.

The bubbles surrounding Taehyung do not change or move. Nothing does. Yoongi frantically peers at his book but no words can be seen on the pages.

No one dares to speak for what feels like an eternity.

Jungkook does not either. He won’t waste his voice yet.

“Well,” Taehyung begins with a levity that struggles to break through the terse muteness, “quite anticlimactic."

“The plague cannot be felt or sensed in any way,” Miseon says.

“When will we know if one of us is affected by it?” Woobin worries.

“Symptoms will show within a day or two at most.”

Taehyung seems fine. Jungkook wants to say and ask as much but his vocal chords don’t seem to work anymore.

“Is anyone feeling odd?”

“Yeah,” Jimin answers Junhyun, “but I think it’s just the fear.”

Jungkook staggers on his feet when he tries to walk forward. Revna feels particularly heavy on his shoulders.

It’s sudden when Taehyung crumbles to his knees on the ground, a hand curled over his own throat.

Expletives elevate here and there.

Jungkook wants to run toward Taehyung but he can’t seem to be able to move from where he's planted. The wind is loud around him, and it takes him a moment to realize that what he’s hearing is his own erratic breath.

“Taehyung!”

Dahee and Jimin rush toward him but they’re halted by Minsoo. Hyuna, Nara and Yoongi are already by Taehyung’s side, performing spells, expelling healing breaths and more. Yumi also approaches Taehyung with a curious look on her face.

Taehyung chokes and it never stops. Akin to what had occurred in Kaiya, a raven nix is coughed out of his mouth. The bell is the same as any other nix, and tendrils crawl up Taehyung’s hand and arm when he grabs it to swallow it down.

However, this time, it does not help.

Taehyung struggles to breathe, his respiration a wheeze that slips past between two pained groans.

Jungkook’s hands tighten around the book.

He waits.

The bubbles are darkening, some taking a nearly black color, others a navy blue. Dahee’s yells are deafening, echoed by Jimin’s curses. Junhyun tries to appease them however he can, but it does not work when an evident alarm runs through the group of healers that all share a look together.

“His organs are shutting,” Ichor announces.

Minsoo’s breath and Nara’s coalesce together into a branch of cherry blossom that Nara hands to Hyuna who performs another spell. The grass quivers around her, soon the entirety of the field doing so. Yoongi helps Taehyung drink from a vial at Minsoo's order.

The weight on Jungkook’s shoulders disappears as a thud echoes behind him.

The sight that follows next resembles the one of the bathroom: of blood and heaving *and so much blood*. Taehyung's skin grows ashen, turning a pale gray seconds later. His hair is next that lightens on his head. The bubble linked to his heart starts obscuring too.

"His immune system is shutting down too. The plague is—"

"Father, please. Please, help him," Dahee begs before falling to her knees. "Taehyung… Elders… My son. Save my son, I beg of you."

"It's detecting his breaths but the writing is erasing more and more. There are two ancient arcanes in him," Yoongi declares.

Jimin's head darts toward him. "What?"

"One has to be the plague."

"The other may be Jungkook's necromancy," Seokjin says.

"Hurry it up," Minsoo shouts.

Hyuna nods her head as she carries on with her task with the help of Nara and Ichor who hands a couple of bubbles to Hyuna. Minsoo downs another vial before smearing a green pomade on Taehyung's neck and keeping his hand there.

Jungkook glances at his wedding ring.

The storm inside is more of a slowly abating drizzle.

A vertigo overtakes Jungkook.

There's a pain that flares in both of his hands, then in his throat, all converging toward his chest. He feels something trickle down his nose that he lifts a hand to. When he peers at it, blood coats the tip of his fingers, echoed by a metallic taste that spreads in his mouth when he swallows.

"Jungkook? Hey, what's going on? Jungkook!" Namjoon catches Jungkook in time when the latter trips forward. "Something's wrong with Jungkook! He's bleeding!"

Taehyung's gaze darts on Jungkook. He looks sickeningly pale, blood tainting his mouth and chin. He attempts to stand but collapses right after. "T—The fucking… Book. Take it away. Did you—" He falls into a coughing fit before he can finish his sentence.

"Is he affected by the plague?"

"It cannot be," Ichor states. "He is no dragonborn."

Jungkook shoves Yoongi away but falls forward when he does so. "I'm fine."

"You obviously fucking aren't. What the hell is going on? What's this?" Yoongi snatches the necrotic book from Jungkook's grasp. "Did you use this?" He hisses when a band of lightning snaps at his arm and burns through his clothes

Jungkook rises to his hands and knees to grab the book back. "Focus on Taehyung. M'fine."

Hyuna rushes toward Jungkook but she trips on her way when a violent gust of wind pushes her away. “Let me help you, angel,” she pants when she reaches him. “It won’t take long.”

Hyuna casts a spell and Jungkook can feel her arcane seep into him, however it’s gone a split second later. She tries a second time, then a third, but the result is the same: her arcane is seemingly swallowed by something once inside Jungkook.

The throe churning within Jungkook’s chest becomes agonizing. He feels hot, sweat clinging to his skin. A sensation of emptiness rises in him. Then, it mingles with this one single sense that overtakes anything else in his mind: an unadulterated *hunger.*

It’s raw and primal, something that Jungkook has never experienced before, even when Seohyung would purposefully skip his meals. It has him sway on his spot as speckles dots his vision.

Jungkook is so unbearably *famished.*

“Taehyung. Kid. You need to calm your breaths down, yeah?”

“Can’t,” Taehyung rasps.

“How is his breath pouch?”

“Damaged, but it shouldn’t be why his breaths are escaping him and reacting like this.”

Jungkook catches then the way everyone in Taehyung’s vicinity is sporting wounds similar to those Minsoo has: cuts here and there, burning marks on clothes and skin, and even some blooming bruises when a particularly strong billow of wind knocks someone to the ground.

Worst of all, Taehyung himself falls victim to his own breaths.

They seem to particularly target him, snipping at the flesh of his arms and face and more.

“Take care of Jungkook,” Yoongi instructs. “I’ll—”

“No.” Jungkook shakes his head. "Just need to eat… Eat something. Taehyung is—”

“The others are handling him. We—”

“Tae’s breaths are… They’re turning against him,” Jungkook croaks out amidst the pain and he needs to eat. He needs to eat *now.*

“You’re not well too, and Hyuna can—”

Jungkook manages to seize Yoongi’s shirt and pull his face closer. His gaze bore onto him. “Taehyung can’t die because you wasted your time on me. If he dies…”

Taehyung watches Jungkook fall unconscious against Yoongi who lays him down.

Yoongi looks rattled. His gaze darts between Jungkook and Taehyung before settling on the former for a moment. He springs up a lull later to rush toward Taehyung.

“Come on.” Yoongi urges Hyuna to follow him.

“But—”

“Come on!”

The two of them halt near Taehyung.

“What do you need me to do?” Yoongi asks Minsoo and Hyuna. “Yumi. Can you help with some songs? Hyuna and Nara are tiring.”

Yumi’s lizards promptly whistles a lullaby. Taehyung isn’t certain of what it does, however Hyuna, Nara and Minsoo's rapid breathing even out. Hyuna’s arcane regains in potency as it thrums in the air. They speak with Ichor but Taehyung doesn’t listen anymore.

Jungkook is surrounded by the rest of the group, even Woobin who produces some ice to cool him down. They try to wake him up. Jungkook's eyes remain closed.

What sliver of energy Taehyung has left is sapped out of him when his wind breath smacks the side of his head. He’s laid to his side by hands that grab him. Taehyung has never felt a pain as acute as the one currently eroding him from the inside, and the shapes before him cloud more and more.

“Father, please,” his mother cries.

“We’re stabilizing him.”

“Maintain your focus on his breath pouch,” Ichor instructs.

Taehyung calls out Jungkook’s name but he’s not certain that the word ever comes out. It must have, somehow, because Jimin peers at him then at Jungkook. Jimin slings his arms beneath Jungkook and lifts him off the ground.

It’s only when Jungkook is laid by Taehyung’s side that Taehyung feels as though he can begin to breathe again. Taehyung can’t properly see Jungkook. He can’t even tell if he’s breathing. He wants to reach out and makes sure for himself but he can’t move a limb.

“It’s me.” Jimin holds Taehyung’s wrist. “I’m putting your hand on his chest,” he says and does as much.

Taehyung nods. His fingers sprawl over the surface beneath them.

Badum. Badum. Badum.

No one seems to be healing Jungkook.

Why is no one helping him?

Taehyung even tells Minsoo to do so, or he believes he does, but Minsoo does not even spare a glance at Jungkook.

Taehyung turns to Yumi. She would help Jungkook, wouldn't she? She likes him, for some reasons.

Her face is pinched into a frown as she surveys Jungkook.

Taehyung glances down when pain erupts on his fingers. Lightning and thin wind blades snap across his fingers, burning and slashing on their path. He can feel the excruciating pain his breaths are going through, and he can only clench his teeth as he becomes a vessel of his arcane's anger.

Wind howls.

Taehyung thinks it's wind, he's not certain.

But something howls and roars in the distance.

In agony.

Two shoes stop next to Taehyung's head.

Taehyung barely manages to lift his head and see Ichor before a hand touches his scalp and darkness swallows him.

---

ooo...ooo

Jungkook can tell he's dreaming.

He's younger. Perhaps 12 years old. He's at Amaris, walking through the streets of his city. He speaks with his people, halting here and there to greet them. He even pauses at this old lady's shop that he would always get free candies from, a privilege of Amaris' Prince, Jungkook guesses. This time it's a tangerine flavored candy.

The lady is humming a lullaby.

Jungkook hums it too. The lullaby is a pretty one.

He turns at a street's corner.

He's inside the citadel now. He still hums the lullaby as he peers ahead.

The world doesn't seem as tall anymore. When he surveys his arms then chest, he notices that he's wearing Taehyung's sweater.

There are cracks on the marble floor, right at the center of the entrance hall. Jungkook does not remember ever seeing this before. More surprisingly, the three sigils of his necromancy are painted on the floor. They're linked together by lines to form a triangle together.

Placed at its center is an odd object.

A candle.

It melts on its own and spreads within the triangle into an orange ink that grows redder by the second. It forms precise lines and what looks like runes.

He walks forward.

He crouches and places his hands atop the broken marble. The fissures expand outward but the floor remains. Jungkook pushes down, using all of his weight, however it's not enough.

○○…○○

Yoongi surveys Jungkook and Taehyung that have both fallen unconscious. He discards the dull pain stinging his limbs to aim his attention on aiding Hyuna and Minsoo with Taehyung. He also ignores the glare Namjoon pins him with when he continues to ignore Jungkook's state.

Yoongi is well aware that he does not have a choice. He has seen it in Jungkook's eyes: this decision Jungkook has already made.

Yoongi does not want to have two graves to care for.

He can hear Dahee's cries and Junhyun's reassuring words that don't reach her. Jimin has calmed down, or perhaps he's in shock. Yoongi isn't sure.

He peers at the bubbles.

Some of the black ones are lightening, regaining their color anew. But it's slow. Too slow. Minsoo is panting around the additional vials he downs to help stabilize his grandson. Hyuna's arcane is a heavy blanket that weighs upon Yoongi. Plants have grown in the field, the grass is taller as well, all bending toward her.

"Come on, kid." Minsoo curses. "Come on."

"I have never witnessed anything quite like this," Ichor hums, examining his bubbles. "Fascinating."

Even Elder Miseon appears cautious at those words. "How so?"

A prismatic breath that pulses between different colors curls out of Ichor's mouth. “This warlock is a necromancer, correct?”

Yoongi confirms it with a nod.

“What abilities?”

Ichor’s gaze shines with a glint of curiosity that would put Yumi to shame.

Yoongi does not like the man, and neither does Yumi who shuffles closer to Jungkook "That is none of your concern."

"It is if you desire my help," Ichor counters.

“He can communicate with the dead and help them pass, as well as raise them,” Namjoon answers before Yoongi can stop him. He’s holding Revna in his arms. “He could, at least, however his necromancy has presumably been dormant since his gift from Kaiya.”

“Help them pass?” Ichor echoes with a light chuckle. “What an unusually altruistic way to view what a necromancer does.”

Ichor makes his way toward Jungkook.

Yoongi rises to his feet.

Yumi steps in too, a shield between Ichor and Jungkook. Yoongi does not question why for now. Instead, he observes the way Yumi’s expression is one he has never seen before, full of anger, but more particularly fear.

Ichor’s gaze is disdainful when it flits on Yumi. “And you are?”

“Stay away from him.” Yumi pets her lizard that is still chanting its lullaby.

“I merely wish to aid them both, the reason why I am here.”

“Smarty… Revna don’t feel good.”

Namjoon emits a sound of concern. “What’s going on?”

“Revna wants Kookie. Revna is… Revna’s sleepy. Don’t feel good. Revna needs Kookie. Kookie too.”

“You don’t know what is wrong with Jungkook," Yumi says. "You can’t help him the same way you are with Taehyung.”

“I can help in many ways. Consider me… curious. About his state, his relation to Taehyung, and what the Oracle may have seen.”

“What were you referring to earlier?” Elder Miseon asks.

“Their arcanes are intertwined.”

Yoongi frowns. “Taehyung and Jungkook’s arcanes?”

“Yes. I know not of what has occurred in Kaiya, however an event there must have been the core of… this.” Ichor vaguely waves around him.

Yoongi only notices then how, unlike the rest of the group, and even Taehyung himself, Jungkook remains unscathed from the lashing of Taehyung’s breaths.

“I can see Jungkook’s necromancy within Taehyung, as well as pieces of Taehyung’s breaths in Jungkook," Ichor continues. "It is something that cannot be achieved so easily, even less between a dragonborn and a warlock.”

Yumi glances at Jungkook then stares at Ichor. “What else can you see?”

“Beasts. Both ravenous." Ichor pauses. "Temporary satiation."

Taehyung grunts, and when Yoongi peers at his book, the writing of half of Taehyung’s breaths listed in the page have almost been completely wiped out.

“Then, more hunger. It is growing.”

“That’s the plague,” Hoseok deduces. “He and Jungkook both keep saying it feasts on arcane and souls. That it devours Taehyung’s breaths.”

But what about Jungkook? Yoongi thinks. Where would a hunger come from for him? Is it simply an echo of what Taehyung feels?

The lizard stops its lullaby.

Yumi’s hand is stilled above its head, then she leans forward to whisper in Ichor’s ear. Ichor listens then nods moments later.

A hiss erupts on Yoongi’s right.

Revna slithers her way across Jungkook’s chest where she curls into a ball. She does not move again, even when Namjoon calls out her name.

Yumi steps aside, allowing Ichor to approach Jungkook.

The man lowers to a crouch at Jungkook’s head. He takes a hold of Taehyung’s wrist even as wind, lightning and fire wound him. A new bubble is breathed out. This one is partial, more of a small dome, and it holds no color as it envelops Taehyung’s hand. It closes around the wrist before detaching itself from it.

Pieces of Taehyung’s breaths are now held within the bubble that already begins to crack.

“What the fuck are you doing,” Yoongi snips.

Ichor does not bother looking at him when he answers. “Confirming.”

Ichor tilts Jungkook’s head back then parts Jungkook’s mouth open. He slips the bubbles past the lips.

Jungkook’s mouth closes. He swallows.

Then he emits a sigh, a breath that sounds fulfilled.

OO…OO

Jungkook feels a surge of tingly wind wrap around him. A dark, elongated matter curls around his arm. It soon takes a familiar shape as the snake's head parts open. Poison drips from the fangs that coalesce with the warm wind and lightning.

Then, within a few seconds, the breaths and poison erode through the fissures. The floor and the painted sigil on them crumbles open before Jungkook.

A flight of stairs greets him, leading down to a basement. Jungkook stands and makes his way down. He halts at the bottom of the stairs.

The room looks familiar.

"…be alone to do the incantation, as the presence of other people may tamper with who the spell will be aimed at," a voice that Jungkook can't recognize says.

"What about his snake?"

"It is not human. The spell won't have an effect on it."

"We should get rid of it nonetheless. Revolting pet."

"Seohyung…" A sigh. "Let him keep his companion. It is the least we can allow for doing… this. Plus you and I both know he will cause trouble if anything happens to his snake."

The examination chair Jungkook had once been attached to is still here.

A voice scoffs. "Fine."

More words float around Jungkook, but he can only decipher pieces of sentences.

"The spell … suffice … mind is easier to trick than … ancient arcane."

Jungkook walks around, trying to look for the source of the unknown, distorted voice. He can't see much, only one sole lantern illuminating the area.

"I will require a minute alone to ensure everything is all and well."

Jungkook traces the edge of the chair. He fiddles with the straps, expecting them to vanish into thin air, yet they remain. He can even feel the cold metal of the buckles.

Something touches his temple.

A tender caress, trailed by a shushing sound.

A voice hums a lullaby, and Jungkook sings along with it. The more he sings, the more the breaths and poison spread across the room that they erode at.

The basement is reduced to nothing seconds later.

Obscurity is all that Jungkook can perceive at first, submerged by an endless sea of black. However, white swallows the darkness around him, and he soon finds himself standing somewhere yet nowhere at the same time. There are cracks on the floor, spreading outward from three large holes.

Jungkook is cold. Freezing. He's naked.

A sound is carried to his ears. It's the singing voice again, belonging to a woman.

Jungkook echoes its hum.

"Shush."

Jungkook quietens.

The voice never stops its humming, and Jungkook can hear a word amidst the lullaby.

"Count."

Jungkook searches for the voice but finds nothing.

He obeys nonetheless.

A drop falls.

"One."

Woosh.

Jungkook's head turns toward the source of the sound.

A dark flame comes out of one of the three holes. It oscillates in the air, shaped into one of his sigils. It somehow casts a dark light against the brightness. It holds within its midst a sphere of an obscure color, a hue akin to blood, flesh and skin. Water sloshes around, lapping at the sole of his feet.

The flame has fully melted into a liquid that flows across the floor and carries the orb toward Jungkook.

Jungkook crouches to grab the sphere. Its substance stains his skin and melts into his flesh that it begins to crawl upon in black patterns. They move higher up his legs and arms to concentrate on his chest in a phantom, cold veil.

The flame remains on the ground, a growing expanse of dark water. One of the holes resorbs on itself. Some of fractures disappear.

A second drop plops.

“Two.”

Another flame seeps out of the second hole, the form of his second sigil, and it's holding in its core an undulating faint blue sphere this time. It liquefies the same way the previous flame had, its water driving the orb toward Jungkook that melts into ink and finds its spot at the same place on his chest.

A third drop.

“Three.”

A new flame appears in front of him. The last sigil. Its sphere adorns several colors: all almost black, yet lightened in shades of deep purple, green, orange and more. This orb looks more translucent, even when it melts into a puddle at his feet before climbing up his legs.

The dark water gathers beneath Jungkook. It crawls up his thighs, his chest and neck, and even his face where he can feel its tendrils. Soon, every inch of his body is painted in tattoos that drift and move across his skin like a living entity.

They glide toward the center of his chest where they all concentrate. Pain erupts, as though something is being ripped apart there, yet a contradictory sense of fullness, of recovery, swathes him.

The fractures are gone, the floor a smooth expanse of glass.

His hands raise. His tensed fingers touch his abdomen and his nails sink into the skin there to try and claw his way inside and get rid of the pain mangling him but it worsens and worsens and—

“I’m sorry, Jungkook.”

OO…OO

“…woke up?”

“…time … credibly taxing, considering…”

Jungkook’s eyes move beneath his lids. He hears voices but can’t make out most of what is being said. The pain in his upper chest is still present, however lesser than before. It’s more of a dull throe

now. When he eventually opens his eyes, it's to a bright light that immediately blinds him.

"Hey, angel."

Hands cup Jungkook's face.

"How are you feeling?" Hyuna wonders, her face shielding Jungkook from the sunlight.

Jungkook makes a noise. He pushes himself on his elbows and sits up with the aid of the arm behind him.

"Are you alright?" Yoongi asks next.

Jungkook lolls forward, hunched over himself. The dream is vivid in his mind, even if he's not certain of what it may have meant. He feels hot. He probably has a fever, he muses when he touches his forehead. He removes his shirt then sighs in relief. The cool breeze feels good against his flaming skin.

"The hell is that," Minsoo snips.

Jungkook glances up at Minsoo who's staring down at him. More specifically at his chest. So Jungkook looks down as well.

A large black tattoo colors the upper center of his chest from where it spreads outward. It thins down to his navel, stretches up to his collarbones, while covering his arms, hands and shoulders. Its lines and curves all continuously shift across his skin in a never ending painting. He can't see the three sigils anywhere anymore.

"How fa—" Jungkook coughs at the dryness scratching his throat. He drinks from the bottle Namjoon hands to him before trying to speak again. "How far does the tattoo go?"

"It covers your throat and neck, as well as your shoulder blades," Namjoon answers.

Jungkook hums and nods, a heavy blanket of exhaustion weighing on him. "I'm hungry."

"Makes sense. Your arcane seems to have gone through some kind of process while you were out," Minsoo says. "Must feel like you've run a marathon."

"I believe your arcane has bloomed from its chrysalis," Junhyun continues. "Why it has happened *now* should concern us."

"Yumi? You've got any idea?" Yoongi asks.

Jungkook peers at Yumi.

Yumi's gaze is misty from where it's riveted on Jungkook. She shakes her head. "No. I… I don't know."

Jungkook has no care for why or how for now. All that matters is that he can feel *it.* It has always been difficult to describe how his necromancy feels, however it isn't anymore: there is a hum that thrums through his veins, a comforting coldness that slips within his very cells.

He wants to see his flames.

They're instantly summoned in his palms, as he has done so thousands of times, however it feels more natural, now. More inherent than before. Easier. Their colors differ slightly. They're still nearly as dark as black, however there is a burgundy hue to it. It reminds Jungkook of how his and Taehyung's arcane had blended together in Kaiya.

The thought tears him out of his musing.

"How long was I out?"

"Half an hour or so," Yoongi answers then adds "He's next to you."

Jungkook's head darts to the right. Taehyung is laid on his side, and Jungkook can't help but think that he looks so eerily dead.

"He's fine," Minsoo reassures before Jungkook can search for the necrotic book. "We've managed to stabilize him. He passed the worst, but…" He's settled crossed legs on the ground, Dahee helping him remain upright. "He won't be able to survive another pulse."

Jungkook glances around. "Where's the book I was holding?"

"One of my crows hid it."

Jungkook's glare drifts on Yoongi. "I need it back."

"I'll give it to you if you tell me what it does."

"Give it back."

"Where did you find it to begin with?" Yoongi fires. "How would it even help wi—"

"It's a book infused with necromancy that can grant 3 wishes for the cost of the wisher's lifespan," Yumi answers and she still looks rattled, albeit veiled by an evident concern. "It can be used in different ways if someone is to die. He got it when he was in Eden. I gave it to him."

Jungkook's teeth grit together. He'd throw Yumi through the closed door she's standing next to if he had any strength left. However he does rise to his feet and has to steady himself when a vertigo swathes him.

Yoongi's nose twitches, his glower darting from Jungkook to Yumi. "What do you mean by lifespan?"

"The first wish steals 10 years, the second 20 years, the third 30 years," Yumi answers.

"Are you fucking insane? How certain are you that the book will actually fulfill any wish you'd make?" Yoongi spits. "Are you insane! Why—"

"I'm not letting Taehyung die."

"I'm not letting *you* die."

"I don't know why everyone is so adamant about dictating which choices I'm allowed to make or not. I've had enough of that my whole life."

“And you won’t have a fucking choice for this. I’m not giving you the book.”

Jungkook is about to utter a callous spiel that he knows he will come to regret afterwards when a grunt grabs his attention.

Dahee rushes toward Taehyung. “Taehyung. Son. My son.”

Jungkook steps back when Junhyun and Jimin approach Taehyung. They help him sit up, however Dahee breaks down into tears moments later, prompting Junhyun to steady them both. Taehyung groggily hugs his mother back, his gaze hazy.

Taehyung looks worse for wear.

There are trembles riddling through his limbs and his skin is still ashen, an echo of his hair that has lightened to ashy blonde in some patches at the roots. The worst is his face: features heightened by how hollow his cheeks are, the veins beneath his skin clashing in deep purples and blues.

“You look like shit,” Jimin greets amidst two sniffles.

“Feel like it too,” Taehyung croaks out.

“Give him some air,” Minsoo demands and entangles Dahee from Taehyung who nods and wipes her nose with the tissue Junhyun gives her.

Taehyung’s gaze is clouded with dark circles and redness, yet his eyes brighten when they find Jungkook. His shoulders that had drawn tight relax around a heavy sigh. “Hey, Viper.”

Jungkook kneels in front of Taehyung, placing his palms on Taehyung’s knees to find some semblance of anchor. He watches how Taehyung gently grazes a hand across the tattoo on Jungkook's chest, the fingertips walking a path up to the collarbones, and halting at the neck. “It’s back,” Jungkook whispers, and he smiles when Taehyung does. “Can you feel it?”

Taehyung emits a soft sound as he nods. “It’s like before, but your necromancy feels more… *More.* It sounds stupid, but…”

“It doesn’t. I understand. It’s the same for me.”

“Do you feel sick? Are you in pain?”

“I’m just hungry, and really tired. My chest hurts a bit but it’s nothing bad anymore. I’ll feel better after eating something. Couldn’t get anything in me this morning.”

Taehyung’s gaze snaps upward. “Check him up.”

“He’s well,” Hyuna says.

“His vitals are good,” Minsoo adds.

“What happened, then? He wasn’t bleeding for nothing,” Taehyung snips and lets go of Jungkook to hunch over himself, leaning forwards on his elbows with a curse.

“I wasn’t affected by the plague. I would have recognized the feeling. But something must have happened to me in relation to the pulse, directly or indirectly.” Jungkook cards a hand through

Taehyung's wet locks to have a look at his face. Taehyung rapidly blinks, his gaze seeming unfocused.

"Could be because of the bridge. It may have been one for something other than our arcanes."

"I'm not sure, but I had a dream," Jungkook starts and explains what he has seen and heard in it.

"The spell that was supposed to erase your memories?" Yoongi asks minutes later and Jungkook nods. Yoongi clicks his tongue then curtly nods. "I never managed to find out who the other warlock working for Seohyung was. It has to be them who cast that spell on you. Tried to, at least."

"I intend to discuss this with Seohyung at the ball," Jungkook dismisses, brain foggy.

"Gonna need to take these down." Minsoo hands two potions to Taehyung. "They'll knock you out for a couple days, but they'll help you regain your energy and should aid in regenerating parts of your breaths."

"What about what Ichor did to Jungkook?" Namjoon starts with a lack of tact that elicits a staccato in Taehyung's chest.

"What do you mean," Taehyung snaps.

"He, huh… He had Jungkook eat some of your breaths," Namjoon answers.

"Your arcanes are intertwined," Ichor chips in when gazes drift on him. "Your necromancy was craving… something. A bird whispered in my ear what it may be."

Yoongi glowers. "Yumi." He looks around for her, however she's gone, and so are her familiars and doors. "Fuck. She's keeping shit from us."

Taehyung calls out Jungkook's name. He presents a marble of wind to him containing lightning as well as some fire in it. "Eat."

"You need to preserve your breaths, Taehyung. I'm fine."

"Eat. I won't ask a third time."

"You're not even asking."

"*Jungkook.*"

Jungkook purses his lips for good measures. He huffs but complies, however not without a weak roll of his eyes that has him swaying on his spot and that Taehyung reprimands with a forehead flick.

The marble of Taehyung's breaths melts on Jungkook's tongue. It tastes wonderful, and best of all, it abates the churning in his chest while also lessening this growing sense of hunger in him.

"How is it?"

"It helps with the pain," Jungkook confusedly answers.

“Arcane can sometimes need sustenance,” Hyuna says as she feeds some kind of seeds to one of her plants. “Akin to the souls you would raise or help pass. Perhaps, you may be the one needing sustenance now.”

“Woobin,” Taehyung calls. “Come.”

Woobin makes his way toward them with cautious steps. “What...”

Taehyung heaves a sound that is half a grunt, half a groan. “It’s killing me to ask this.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Make some ice and feed them to Jungkook. I want to check something.”

Jungkook arches a brow. He leans near Taehyung then pokes his cheek. “Are you really my Taehyung? Were you perhaps possessed by a soul when you fainted?”

“Truly demented what crossing death can do to someone,” Jimin teases next with a shake of his head.

“Just—” Taehyung sighs. “Do it, Woobin.”

Woobin executes without further remarks. He produced some ice crystals that he holds in his palm. He brandishes one of the shards toward Jungkook’s mouth.

Taehyung snatches it and yanks Woobin by the collar of his shirt. “The hell is wrong with you.”

“You told me to feed him, jackass.”

“I didn’t mean with your filthy hand, dipshit. He’s not your husband, as far as I know.”

“He’s not your mate either, as far as I know.”

“You’re lucky I don’t have the strength to punch you right across your hideous face.”

“I’m not above settling our feud when you’re weaker than you usually are.”

“I’ll fucking—”

Jungkook seizes the ice shard and throws it in his mouth. It cracks under his teeth before melting down his throat. “There. Now what?”

Taehyung throws Woobin aside who kicks him in the leg. “How do you feel?”

“Normal?”

“Does it feel similar to when you ate my breaths?”

“No. It feels as though I ate ice. With your breaths, it… I felt fulfilled. Partially.”

“Partially?”

“Mhm,” Jungkook nods. “Perhaps I need more?” Taehyung immediately begins to make more arcanic candies for Jungkook. It’s at the 5th one that Jungkook steps in. “Stop. You can’t exert your breaths.”

“Eat them and tell me how you feel.”

Jungkook does so while leveling Taehyung with a stony look. While the arcanic marbles of Taehyung's breaths still taste wonderful, they however don't impact the still present pain, nor do they satiate Jungkook, and he explains as much to Taehyung.

"But one of the fares your necromancy wants are my breaths," Taehyung concludes and there's a little smile that twitches at the corner of his mouth.

Jungkook bursts into laughter. "You're such a possessive idiot."

"Your arcane must have started mutating when we shared the pomegranate, maybe even before. You ate some of my breaths then. The chrysalis was made with my breaths inside you."

"So, in other words," Jimin begins, "you helped Jungkook nurture then *birth* his evolved necromancy."

"Shut up!" Jungkook exclaims, his face aflame, right as Taehyung mumbles a *'Shut the fuck up.'*

"What effect Jungkook's arcane may have on Taehyung?" Yoongi asks next. "If your arcanes are intertwined, it must go both ways."

"We should try." Jungkook summons his flames and eagerly feeds them to Taehyung. He tries to not focus too much on the way Taehyung's tongue curls at the corner of his mouth to catch an escaping flame, but he miserably fails when he ponders how long it has been since he had the chance to kiss Taehyung.

"So?" Yoongi presses, staring at Taehyung.

"Oddly enough, I do feel a tad better. The plague feels slightly less painful. Less present."

Jungkook's head tilts to the side as he pensively hums. He glances at the seal on Taehyung's wrist.

It's wavering and faded, as it had done so in Kaiya, and unlike back then, it remains as such even a minute later.

"That is—" Neige interrupts Woosung to seemingly converse with him. He nods then says "My daughter just confirmed to me that the seal has lost in power."

"Can your necromancy erode arcane?" Namjoon blurts out while peering at Jungkook. "That'd explain the impact on Taehyung's seal and the plague."

"It would also explain this." Ichor hums. He's holding Revna by the neck, the latter limp in his hold. "An awakening dragonborn basilisk… How uncanny."

Jungkook springs up right as Taehyung does.

Jungkook carefully snatches Revna from the dragonborn and holds her in his arms while Taehyung curls a protective arm over the two of them, pushing them behind him. "Lovely? Are you alright? Lovely?"

"What the fuck have you done to her," Taehyung snips.

"I was merely watching her," Ichor answers.

Jungkook's eyes widen when he notices something. “Taehyung. Tae. Look.” Taehyung turns around to survey Revna. “Her seal.”

The skin on Revna’s head appears to crackle on her forehead, right where the sigil is beginning to peel away and taking a more of a transparent gray color.

“She’s shedding it?” Woobin wonders.

“Holy fuck,” Taehyung blurts out.

“By the Elders,” Jimin is next while Namjoon dissolves into a litany of *‘Oh my God’*.

“The seal *can* be removed,” Jungkook exclaims with a bright smile that Taehyung echoes with a bewildered laugh. “I can help erase her curse, and if I do, she could regain her human form. Maybe I should feed her my flames as well, while feeding them to you to fight off the plague.”

“Let’s not get hasty. We still have no clue what your necromancy can do now,” Taehyung reasons. “Is she not waking up at all?”

Jungkook shakes his head. Hyuna and Minsoo do a quick check up on her, and they confirm minutes later that Revna is in perfect health, and is simply asleep. They even say that she is particularly healthy. Incredibly so, in fact.

“She’s quite cold,” Jungkook worries.

“Her metabolic rate seems to have lowered a tad," Minsoo starts, "but nothing worrisome at all.”

“We need to find your mother, Jungkook,” Taehyung says with a certain grievousness. “She’s the one with the answers about what’s going on with your necromancy and why it suddenly started mutating. It could help us understand what's going on with Revna and your bond with her.”

“We’ll ask Sungmin at the ball," Jungkook nods.

“In the meantime, we should rest, especially you both,” Hyuna intervenes, weariness weighing her form. “We have all exhausted a lot of our arcane today, and Taehyung has grazed death too close for comfort. I worry that remaining awake may worsen the plague within him. ”

“She is right.” Dahee holds Taehyung’s arm. “You need to sleep, Son.”

“He looks like a grandpa,” Woobin teases Taehyung.

“Huh?”

“You’ve got gray hair.”

Taehyung blinks a few times. He touches his own hair and pulls on a patchy, ashy strand. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Your immune system collapsed. You were dying at a fast rate,” Minsoo explains.

Neige suddenly makes a sound that grabs everyone’s attention. She urgently bumps her snout against Woosung’s shoulder. Woosung’s gaze widens, his mouth parting then closing around naught.

“What is wrong?” Dahee frowns.

“A presence in the vow of Taehyung’s seal is starting to vanish.”

“Vanish?”

“Whoever this leader is, they are currently dying,” Woosung announces. “It is perhaps a matter of a couple days at best.”

Miseon crosses an arm over her chest as she and Ichor exchange a gaze. “If that is truly the case, the plague has gained in virulence, however it has only happened once before. Thirteen years ago, to be precise. Something new must be at the core of this new, sudden acceleration.”

"We best resolve this mystery promptly," Ichor says.

Miseon sighs. “I’m concerned about Cahira.”

“You must visit her, ensure she and Donovan are well and guarding Kaiya,” Ichor demands. “I will return home, and hope no Elder has died. We must discuss what has occurred today and what our next step will be.”

The curious gaze Ichor settles on Revna does not go unnoticed by Jungkook, however before he can probe about it, Ichor flies away without another word.

“Jungkook,” Yoongi calls. “Try this.”

Jungkook goes through the same process with the ink sphere Yoongi hands to him. Surprise paints Yoongi, Taehyung and Namjoon’s gazes. When Jungkook walks up to them, he reads the results.

Only one single ancient arcane has been detected in him.

“It should have been able to detect the other three considering that your necromancy is back,” Yoongi says.

“Maybe I’ve truly lost two aspects of my arcane during the mutation.” Jungkook isn’t disappointed as much as he is confused. “I have to talk to Yumi.”

“Something we can somewhat count on is that Yumi wants to protect you? I think,” Namjoon muses. “She has done so a few times in her own ways.”

“My concern is why,” Jungkook retorts. “I don’t trust her, and I must be more than a curious oddity to her.”

“Is that all?” Minsoo grunts. “I need sleep. Yesterday.”

“I believe so, yes. Everyone must recuperate. We have three months before the next pulse,” Miseon says. She gestures toward Jungkook and Taehyung. “Make sure to feed each other your arcane for the next weeks at least until we have unearthed more about what has gone down today. Kaiya’s gift has been given to you both for a reason.”

“Clearly,” Jungkook discards with more temper than intended.

“Viper,” Taehyung warns.

“What? I wasn’t sarcastic.”

“Like hell you weren’t.”

“I wasn’t.”

“I know you.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do.”

Jungkook gnaws on his lower lip to bite back his smile. He’s relieved to see Taehyung well and awake. Taehyung still looks sick, however he has regained more of his colors after consuming Jungkook’s flames and drinking Minsoo’s potions. “Yes.. You do.”

“Once lovebirds, always lovebirds,” Hoseok says with a theatrical fond sigh.

Dahee emits a tired chuckle. “My head hurts. I want to go home, Darling.”

“Let us fly there,” Junhyun agrees. “Jimin, come with us.”

“Yeah.”

Jungkook surveys the family that groups together. He then peers at Taehyung who looks horribly torn on what decision to make. Jungkook can’t help but laugh. “Go with them.”

“Are you really fine?” Taehyung worries. “You’ll be alright if—”

“I’m well. I promise, Tae.”

“He’ll be with Namjoon and I,” Yoongi says. “We need to talk anyway."

Jungkook internally grimaces. “Yes, that.”

Taehyung’s gaze drifts between Jungkook and Yoongi. “Alright.”

After producing some storm candies for Jungkook, Taehyung makes several pearls of wind that Jungkook fills with his flames.

Jungkook contentedly hums when he’s engulfed in Taehyung’s arms. He could fall asleep right then and there. He chuckles in Taehyung’s neck when a nose lazily rubs back and forth at the dip of his shoulder.

“You’re leaving each other for barely a day or two, you’ll be fine,” Jimin says with a roll of his eyes. “Come on.”

Jungkook pouts. He breaks the hug then pecks Taehyung’s cheek before Taehyung is taken away by Jimin. “See you later.”

“Yeah, bye,” Taehyung waves him off.

“No goodbye kiss for Jungkook?” Jimin teases.

“Shut up.”

“Father, join us, please,” Dahee asks and Minsoo does not protest.

Jungkook peers at Woobin who observes the family with a subtle envy that Jungkook still catches on.

Woobin lowers his head and begins to swivel around.

“You’re going back to Jimin’s?”

Woobin halts. “I don’t have anywhere else to g—”

“Woobin!” Jimin calls out. “What are you doing?! Hurry it up!”

Jungkook watches a sulking Taehyung who’s clearly not happy about the decision, but still complies nonetheless.

Woobin stares at his brother, a shine in his gaze. “I don’t know if I deserve this, or if he deserves a second chance either,” he rasps with a mirthless chuckle.

“Does it matter?” Jungkook meets Woobin’s gaze. “You both want to give each other a second chance. So does Taehyung and his family. Take it.”

Woobin exhales. He curtly nods and shoves his hands in his pants pockets, shoulders drawn tight. He makes his way toward Junhyun who has shifted into his dragon self.

“Anything on him?” Jungkook asks once Woobin is out of earshot.

“Nothing. No tracker whatsoever.”

“Let’s continue keeping an eye on him just in—” Jungkook falls mute when a raven flies toward Yoongi, holding in its beak the necrotic wishing book.

“We need to talk.”

The second they enter the house Yoongi and Namjoon occupy in Vanae, Yoongi tosses the tome on the table.

“Explain.”

Jungkook exhales through his nose as he walks to the living room and plops down on the couch. “The book was given to me in Eden by Yumi dressed as an old man. She knew I was a necromancer.”

“And you’ve told Taehyung about it.”

“Yes, because—”

“Because nothing. Why would you tell him and not us?”

“This was right before him and I were taken away.”

“What about after?”

Jungkook quietens, gaze cast low on the ground.

“We understand that everything that is developing with Taehyung is new and important to you, but so are we,” Namjoon quietly says, and he sounds hurt when he does so. “You can talk to us about this kind of thing. You should. Not everything has to be kept between you and Taehyung. We’re your family too.”

The wrenching sting in Jungkook’s chest heightens, and he knows that it isn’t due to his necromancy here. “I know. I’m sorry. I… I don’t have any excuses. I’m sorry.”

“I can’t believe that you, and most of all *Taehyung,* would keep this hushed when he’d tear the world in half if you were to be scratched by a fucking tree,” Yoongi scoffs. “Thank God Yumi told us, uh? You wouldn’t have said anything if it weren’t for her.”

“I intended to tell you eventually.”

“Yeah, after a wish would be made. When it’s too late. When it doesn't matter anymore.”

Jungkook does not deny the truth.

“How did you figure out what it does?” Namjoon wonders while skimming through the blank pages.

Jungkook explains what had happened at the cave, earning himself two glares.

Namjoon pinches the bridge of his nose. “The way you and Taehyung feed each other’s recklessness is infuriating.”

"We also keep each other safe," Jungkook tentatively mumbles.

“Have we done something that makes you believe you can’t speak to us about matters like this?” Yoongi’s face pinches into a pained frown. “Because if that’s the case—”

“No. No, no,” Jungkook rushes to say. “You didn’t. I swear. I just… At the time, I thought Taehyung wouldn’t care much if I were to use a wish for someone or myself. I knew he could handle me doing something like this. For the most part. I mean— I guess that's not the case anymore? It depends,” he backtracks when flashes of his and Taehyung fight in the basement flicker in his mind.

It elicits a huffed chuckle from Namjoon.

“My point is that I didn’t want to worry either of you. I wanted— I *want* to be able to freely use the book if something happens to my family. And I thought that if only Taehyung knew about it, he’d be easier to fight off than if the two of you were also aware of what the wishing book does.”

“And you really think Taehyung won’t intervene if you try to use it?” Yoongi wonders as he sits on the couch.

“Of course he’ll try to. We fought about this. But even he must know he won’t be able to stop me.” Jungkook does not need to mention that his conviction is also aimed at Yoongi and Namjoon, and he doesn't need to ask if they've heard it either when they both bristle.

Namjoon and Yoongi peer at each other.

They heave a drawn-out sigh in unison.

Yoongi runs a hand down his face. “Show us how it works before we continue with the nagging.”

Jungkook ignores the exasperated looks Yoongi and Namjoon level him with when he nips the tip of his index and uses his blood to bring forth the book creature.

Namjoon reels back at its appearance while Yoongi takes his time to examine it and read the instruction paper.

After half an hour has passed, Yoongi has confirmed some information.

“It contains human remains?” Jungkook echoes.

“The bones, the pages, the leather, the ‘ink’,” Yoongi grimaces with a glance at the creature that has turned back to its book form. “ *Everything* is made from human remains.”

“At first I assumed this was one of Yumi’s familiars, but she denied that,” Jungkook muses.

“She loves to play with words though,” Namjoon retorts. “She may have not made that book, but perhaps someone in her entourage did. She must have a family as well. Or had, if they aren’t all dead somehow. She may have inherited this from her parents? What do we know about her past?”

“Not much. She may speak to me if I visit her alone. I’m curious to know how she knew what would help me.”

Yoongi nods. “She knows more than she lets on.”

"Yeah." Jungkook fiddles with his wedding ring.

He stills.

While the miniature has faintly regained in intensity, the diamond withholding it has fissures cracked across the surface.

Jungkook’s lips pinch.

“What’s wrong?” Namjoon worries.

“Taehyung’s diamond is damaged.”

“It cracked when he passed out, “ Yoongi explains. “This stupid bastard. Acting as if he can afford to die when he has to take care of you.”

Jungkook slumps down his seat. “I can take care of myself just fine”

“Must be why you want to sacrifice years of your life for him," Yoongi fires back.

Jungkook falls mute. He touches his chest where he can feel this distant sensation of water flowing across the skin there. “I'd do the same for you both. But Taehyung is important to me as well. I’m just…”

“In love with him? We know,” Namjoon huffs. “Hard to miss the sea of hearts sprouting out of your eyes whenever he’s around you.”

Jungkook gawks. “I’m not doing that!”

“You are. It’s obnoxious,” Yoongi pipes in.

Yoongi and Namjoon are relentless for the next few minutes in their teasing.

Jungkook is suddenly hit by how much he has missed this and his friends.

“I need to know for certain," Yoongi resumes after he and Namjoon have quietened down. "If something happens to Taehyung, will you use the book for him?”

Jungkook opts to be honest this time.

“Yes.”

Yoongi exhales.

“I can’t— I can’t *be* without him, and even if I could, I don't want to.” Jungkook’s fingers tighten around his cup of tea. “I’m not asking for you to accept this. I'm not even asking you to not intervene if I am to use the book. You can certainly try. However it won't change any decision I'll make." His gaze drifts between Yoongi and Namjoon. "I don’t want to actively die, if this is what worries you,” he adds after a beat of silence. “I want to live with Taehyung. I want to grow old with him, make a life with him and Revna while presiding over Amaris and Vanae together. That is something you can trust me with. I’ll do everything I can to keep him and I alive, but I won't concern myself with what it may cost in return.”

Namjoon glances at Yoongi, the two peering at each other.

“Are you, huh, are you fine with that? As stupid as a question that is, considering what the book does,” Jungkook mumbles.

“Of course not,” Yoongi says, “but we’ll be damned if we don’t find a way to undo the consequences of a wish.”

“Taehyung said something similar,” Jungkook chuckles to himself.

“Promise us you won’t use the book recklessly, that you’ll think it through.”

“And ask Yumi about it,” Yoongi adds.

“I promise. This is a last resort kind of thing," Jungkook assures.

“Good. Good,” Namjoon yawns, laid on his side and head propped on Yoongi’s lap. “So we have three months to solve everything.”

“Approximately,” Jungkook nods. “Perhaps more if we find a way to save Taehyung during the next pulse. The fact that he is still alive and managing to fight off an arcanic plague that has been decimating his kind is astonishing in and of itself.”

“Another concern is what *you* have gone through. The pulse has impacted you in some ways, whether it be because of Taehyung or something else.”

Namjoon nods. “I highly doubt it’s a coincidence that Jungkook's arcane left its chrysalis right when the pulse happened.”

“What is particularly weird is that Jungkook isn’t a dragonborn. So how could he be affected by the plague?”

“I was thinking that it may be due to what happened in Kaiya between Taehyung and I. It created a bridge between our arcanes. The plague may have walked through this same bridge?”

“That does not explain why it would impact you if what it does only wounds dragonborns.”

“I keep thinking about my new tattoo and the dream I had, and how everything has ruenited into one.” Jungkook leans forward. He takes a piece of parchment to draw a quick sketch of what he had seen there. “My necromancy has always had three aspects to it. Three sigils that are now gone. Three aspects that have also been reduced to one in Yoongi's book. In the dream, or whatever it was, those three sigils were painted on the ground in a triangle.”

“And there were runes in the middle, right?”

“There was, yes. Or I believe they were runes. I’m only realizing it now, but Taehyung’s breaths as well as Revna’s poison were what helped me break through this floor when I couldn’t do it on my own, meaning that they helped me tear through the runes. They help me pry open the completed chrysalis."

"And Kaiya's gift is what had kick-started the creation of this chrysalis," Namjoon says, to which Jungkook agrees with a nod.

"The only thing that confuses me is why the chrysalis was completed then opened during the pulse of all moments," Jungkook carries on. "Perhaps the plague aided in eroding the runes? But how could that have been possible…"

"Maybe the runes had some dragonborn arcane?"

"Maybe." Jungkook wonders at once if his bond with Revna runs deeper than he had ever imagined.

Yoongi's thoughts must follow the same path because he goes "What do we know about Revna? About the scroll you found her in?"

"Aside from the fact that I had unsealed her from the scroll after accidentally bleeding on it, all I know is that Seohyung and Sungmin had found the scroll," Jungkook answers. "I had stolen it from the chamber where they keep their treasures and artifacts Seohyung collects."

"We'll have to do some investigating when we'll be at the citadel." Yoongi grabs the parchment to survey Jungkook’s sketch. “What we need to figure out is who could have placed those runes in

you."

“It could be the other warlock Seohyung works with?” Namjoon proposes. “Or the one that tried to erase Jungkook’s memories. Or both, if they're the same person.”

“I believe it's the middle option, or the latter,” Jungkook nods.

Yoongi observes Jungkook. "What's your theory?"

"We may have been completely wrong about what my necromancy and its former sigils were, and how it works. Look.”

Jungkook removes his shirt. He watches the way the patterns of his tattoo continuously shift across his skin, however it's easy to notice how they all spread from the center of his chest where what looks like the beginning of a sigil is being drawn, but never quite finished.

“They’re still moving?”

“They haven’t stopped once since I’ve woken up,” Jungkook confirms.

“The mutation isn’t over.”

Jungkook shakes his head. “This is where we may be wrong. I don’t think it’s a mutation or an evolution.”

“What are you thinking of?”

“My necromancy has always felt… random, for lack of a better word, and hollow. There’s no red string that we can see threading together the abilities to speak with the dead, raise them, and help souls pass, yet I’m able to manipulate them all. Why? How? It always felt as though something was missing."

"Perhaps there's no reason?" Namjoon says, who grows increasingly lost.

"That makes no sense. I've noticed that every warlock has a core. A tether. Yoongi can create a plethora of different spells and contraptions, but they're all tethered by one thing: ink. Hyuna is the same, where the tether is her plants. Even Yumi too, where in her case the link appears to be the creation of familiars. But what about me? At first I thought my flames were it, but even *they* are an aspect of my necromancy. I can speak and see lost souls without using my flames. My flames seem to only serve as a tool for my necromancy, not as its core."

"You believe something was done to your 'tether'?"

"Yes. I never questioned anything up until what happened in that dream earlier, and how I felt afterwards: the pain, the hunger, but also the start of a fullness…” Jungkook carries on. “When I was in that white space, the three sigils came out of the three holes cracked in the floor, all holding an orb. They all melted and were absorbed by my body, becoming what my current tattoo is. They all became one. *Whole.* I... I felt whole.”

Namjoon blinks a few times. "What are you saying?"

"Nothing was ever quite full with my arcane. I can raise the dead, but suffer as a result. I can see the dead, but my eyes need to *morph* to do so. I can speak with the dead, but they need to have

enough energy in them for me to hear and see them. I can help souls pass, but I don't even know how or *if* I ac. The only reason why I believe I do is because whenever I would do this, the souls would tell me they feel finally at peace before disappearing. But I never actually know what happens to them."

"Now that you mention it, it's true that every warlock has a core to their arcane," Yoongi mulls over.

"Yet there seems to be none for me. If anything, my arcane appears damaged and weakened, to a point where it requires a cost to be able to use it, like my eyes or undead's pain."

"That would be..." Yoongi curses. "That would be some extremely invasive, personal and *powerful* spell for it to affect a warlock's arcane to this extent. I've never heard of anything like this."

"I wonder if it was accidental," Namjoon muses. "Perhaps the person who has done this *did* try to seal Jungkook's necromancy, but failed, hence the tether's absence. His arcane could have then become this kind of... Frankenstein creature made from wounded, partial pieces of his necromancy."

"I don't think it was a seal. I was always able to use my necromancy, a seal, even if faulty, wouldn't have allowed that. I believe that, instead of being sealed, my arcane was fragmented into three on purpose. To- To weaken it, perhaps," Jungkook continues and Namjoon emits an *'Oh'*. "If we go down that line, it may mean that the three sigils were keeping my necromancy fragmented, that *this* was what their appearance on me meant all along."

"If that's the case, then we never really knew what your necromancy truly is," Yoongi breathes out, alarm washing over his face.

"I think that whatever occurred during the plague's pulse has helped me break those sigils that may have been keeping my necromancy fragmented," Jungkook declares. "And I believe that what's happening to me right now is that my necromancy is becoming whole anew, that the pieces are putting themselves back together. The tether is reforming, for better or for worse."

After taking a quick shower, Taehyung had decided to stake claim to one of the two armchairs that he is now sprawled onto, half sitting, half laid down. Minsoo has not stuck around for very long, also needing some rest for himself.

Taehyung's gaze flits on Woobin who's planted at the end of the couch, looking delightfully uncomfortable.

Taehyung is about to utter a teasing remark when he's pulled to his feet by his mother who then tugs him toward the second couch where they both settle down. He tangles his hands with hers when she rests her head on his shoulder, soothing her trembles. "I'm fine, Mom."

"Yes." Dahee tightens her hold. "You are."

“As horrific as it may sound, the approaching death of a member of the Council from the plague is quite reassuring,” Jimin says, settled next to Junhyun. “If any of us had it, we would have shown symptoms as well already considering how the plague has worsened.”

“Indeed,” Junhyun nods. “We know for certain all of us are well.”

“I’m more concerned about our people,” Taehyung heavily sighs. “There’s bound to be questions if the plague now kills within hours rather than days. Sudden deaths like these aren’t normal. We’ll have to address this at some point.”

“We must exert cautiousness,” Dahee says. “It is a difficult decision to make, an even harder news to break to our people.”

“Has Seungwon said anything about this to anyone?” Jimin asks Woobin.

Woobin shakes his head. “He kept it to himself, as far as I know.”

Taehyung hums. “Are you still in contact with him?”

“No,” Woobin grimaces. “I don’t want to.”

“Telling the truth?”

“I don’t have any reason to lie.”

“Fear is one of them.”

“You don’t realize how much I’ve put at stake when I warned you about the Council’s arrival."

"Did you?"

"I risked *everything,* Taehyung," Woobin sneers. "I risked my home and lost it. I risked my friendships and lost them. I haven’t been able to see Minho once. Hell, I’m pretty sure Father must have disowned me by now. I don’t have anything anymore while still being in danger because Father does not take well to anyone opposing him, let alone betraying him. I didn’t lie when I told Jimin I’m tired of living in fear at all times. I’m really tired. I just… I want to live, for once.”

“All of this is hard to believe when you’ve put a tracker on Jungkook. When you’ve participated, even if from afar, in the man in the scent kidnapping us,” Taehyung lists with detachment. “Or when you've always been an ass for no reas—”

“I’m sorry.”

Taehyung’s eyes meet Woobin’s apologetic one.

“For everything, I guess. It was never for no reason, even if that reason was a selfish one. I was…" Woobin pauses. I was always envious of you. I hated you for stealing my brother, for seeming so free and happy, for being what I’d always crave to have: a real family. I suppose I wanted to take that happiness away from you, make you feel as miserable as I was. I resented Jimin even more, if it’s any consolation for you.”

“Junhyun and I had done everything in our power to bring you home alongside Jimin,” Dahee says. “We had tried it all. We had taken this matter to the Council, but Seungwon has always disputed us.

We wanted you to live with us, Woobin.”

“It’s easy to say a decade later when I’m not a 10 year old child anymore." There’s a shine in Woobin’s eyes, rendered callous by the glower twisting his face.

Dahee reels back as she takes her hand away from Taehyung’s.

“Jimin had already run away from home before either of you had tried to take me in as well. I was left alone with Father at the time. *I* was the one who had to deal with his anger. *I* was the one forced to pick up the pieces Jimin had left behind.” Woobin pinches his trembling lips together. “When you eventually came to bring me with you, it was too late. I was too scared to leave. How was I supposed to defy Father?”

Taehyung’s eyes lower. An uncomfortable twist churns in his stomach.

A similar emotion must run through his family if their dejected frowns and evasive gazes are any indication.

“I’m far from being a saint, and I’ll never beg for any kind of forgiveness I don't deserve, but don’t act like you’ve tried your hardest to save me from Father like you'd done so for Jimin. Taehyung has wronged me as much as I have, even if I can admit I’ve started it most of the time. Jimin has refused all contact with me out of fear for Father, which I get, but one would expect better from their own older brother. Dahee and Junhyun gave up on me unlike they had with Jimin.”

“We had tried, Woobin,” Junhyun pleads. “But you always refused to come with us, even—”

“I was terrified! I was a child! I didn’t know any better! You don’t have any idea of the hell I went through after Jimin left.” Woobin halts when his voice cracks. He presses the back of his hand against his mouth. “How was I supposed to agree and come live with you when Father had threatened my own life if I ever were to leave him? I may have been cowardly and resentful toward your family, but so were you toward me back then and afterwards. All I did was to survive.”

Junhyun’s mouth opens then closes before running a hand down his face. “I… I’m sor—”

“I don’t need any apology. What’s done is done. All I want now is to live and be freed from him,” Woobin dismisses after clearing his throat and wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. “I’m not looking for a new family or anything like that.”

“I’m sorry, Woobin. I’m so sorry. Elders…” The heels of Jimin’s hand are pressed against his eyes, some tears wetting his cheeks. “I swear I’ve tried my best to protect you from him. But it was so much. Too much. I—”

“I know. It doesn’t matter anymore. I want him gone. I don’t want him to rule our people anymore, to have us live in fear of what he may do. I want to lead my land, if I have any left,” Woobin says with a mirthless chuckle.

“We’ve talked about this with Jungkook when we discussed what Seungwon had done to him,” Taehyung starts and meets Woobin’s misty eyes. “We’ve been thinking of building up a case against him, and have him be finally trialed by the Council, no matter how much it inconvenienced those fuckers.”

“You think it’s possible?”

“It’ll certainly be easier than incarcerating Seohyung,” Taehyung grimaces.

Woobin nods as he pensively looks ahead. “I’ve thought about killing him, however I’d rather avoid being the one sent to jail.”

“I’m sure we can find other people who will testify against him. I know Jungkook will agree,” Taehyung assures. “I will as well, since I’ve witnessed a few things through Jimin.”

“I’ll be there too,” Jimin rasps.

“So will we.” Dahee peers at Junhyun who nods in agreement, his expression somber.

Taehyung silently surveys Woobin for a moment, viewing the man under a more personal light. Taehyung would never pretend to begin understanding the horrors Woobin has gone through for the past decade, however a part of him empathizes with the fear and resentment aimed at the world as a result.

“I’m sorry.”

Woobin’s widened eyes snap on Taehyung.

“We should have tried more,” Taehyung continues. “We shouldn’t have given up on you the way we did. And I should have tried to understand you, rather than… Than responding to your fire with more fire.”

Woobin nods. He rapidly blinks then dries the tears that escape him. “I’m sorry too. You’re still an ass, though.”

“Takes one to recognize another, uh?”

Woobin huffs a small chuckle. “If he hasn’t gotten rid of my stuff at home, there’s a chest hidden in my room full of journals I would keep recounting my life. I’m pretty sure it goes over most of what he's done to me, and a bit of what he has done to others. If we can get the chest back, that would be some additional proof against him.”

“Taehyung and I can retrieve it,” Jimin proposes and Taehyung agrees.

“Thanks,” Woobin mumbles. “I’d like to avoid going there myself, if possible.”

“Of course.” Dahee rises to her feet. She grabs a hold of Woobin’s hand, and she’s gentle when she cups his face. “We have failed you in the past, however we will do everything we can to help you now. You have my promise, Woobin.”

Woobin nods again but this time it’s wobbly, interrupted by an aborted sob that he muffles on Dahee’s shoulder when she pulls him into a hug. When Junhyun walks past them to prepare more tea, he pauses to lightly squeeze Woobin’s shoulder then ruffle his hair.

Taehyung looks at the ceiling when his eyes begin to prickle. Can’t let Woobin know he’s moved by all this.

Woobin looks even more awkward than before when Dahee walks off to join Junhyun in the kitchen. So Taehyung opts to ease him with a teasing quip.

“Who would have thought I would witness the great Woobin weeping in my living room?”

“You don’t even live here anymore,” Woobin retorts. He falls back into his familiar demeanor: reclined against the backrest, arms thrown over it in a cocky attitude that is lessened by his reddened eyes and the bit of snot wetting his nose.

“You're really not planning anything, right?” Taehyung asks one last time for good measure.

“I’m not,” Woobin petulantly sighs. “I’m just tagging along because I don’t want to be alone.”

“Blindsiding us won’t end well for you.”

“I’m well aware. And I’d rather not upset that husband of yours,” Woobin adds with a shudder.

Taehyung has to bite back a prideful smile.

“I hope Jungkook is faring well,” Dahee sighs and settles next to Taehyung again. “I was worried when he collapsed after you. It was unexpected.”

“He should be fine. I trust him and Minsoo to tell us if something’s wrong,” Taehyung answers.

“I am concerned about Revna as well, and how she has suddenly fallen asleep,” Junhyun says. “The pulse appears to have affected her too, along with Taehyung and Jungkook.”

“Actually, I have an idea of what may be happening, in terms of reptile biology,” Woobin announces. “Snakes can enter this phase called brumation.”

“Brumation?” Taehyung echoes.

“To put it simply, it’s a snake hibernation. Minsoo said her metabolic rate had lowered, which is something that tends to happen during a brumation along with shedding their skin,” Woobin explains. He crosses his arms over his chest and lowers in his seat when Taehyung squints at him. “M’just interested in snakes and lizards. They’re reptiles too. So...”

“She’s hibernating, then?”

“Brumating,” Woobin corrects Jimin. “But yes. Whatever is happening to her must be taxing.”

“Could she be brumating and shedding her skin because she may be regaining her human form?” Taehyung excitedly wonders. “This may be it. Her seal *is* disappearing.”

Junhyun hums. “How is she breaking the curse of the seal when she never could before?”

“She is not alone,” Dahee interjects. “The mutation of Jungkook’s necromancy must be a reason why.”

“The plague did have an effect on Jungkook and may have helped in the mutation of his arcane. His arcane then may have had an impact on the bond he shares with Revna, and by extension her curse,” Taehyung muses. “There’s something we’re missing there, perhaps related to the soul he drank in Kaiya.”

“These are questions we shall discuss after resting. You must take Minsoo’s potions and sleep, Son,” Dahee states.

“Yeah, I’m exhausted.”

Jimin bids Taehyung goodbye and hugs him before leaving the house with Woobin, the two brothers visibly having more to discuss together.

Taehyung settles in bed, his parents sitting on the two chairs occupying the balcony of his former bedroom.

It’s with a certain sense of emptiness in bed, no intelligible mumbling or weight on his chest, that Taehyung falls asleep.

Taehyung ends up sleeping nonstop for the next three days. He hadn’t looked quite as worrying pale and sunken when he had woken up again, his body having regained most of its strength and colors. His hair, on the other hand, still retains their ashen patches, to his dismay.

He hadn’t left his parents' house once, meaning that he hasn’t gotten the chance to see Jungkook since the pulse.

Saying that Taehyung has missed him would be an understatement he wouldn't dare speak out loud. However the smile that stretches his lips as he watches a grinning Jungkook charging toward him may betray his longing for his viper's presence.

Taehyung emits a punched out grunt when Jungkook rams onto him. “Careful, dumbass.”

Jungkook tightens his hold around Taehyung’s neck. “I missed you,” he mutters in Taehyung's neck and presses a fleeting kiss there.

Taehyung’s chest tickles. “You too.”

“Lovebirds,” Hoseok sighs.

“We’re alright,” Seokjin smiles to a concerned Jimin. “I take it everyone is well too?”

“Yes, however we have a few things to discuss,” Dahee begins.

Jungkook breaks the hug — to Taehyung’s disappointment who has yet to fulfill his scenting impulse. Jungkook smells too much like himself, and not enough like *them.*

Any thought of scenting leaves Taehyung’s mind when Jungkook begins to recount his discoveries about the book, and most importantly about his necromancy that leaves Taehyung speechless and gawking at Jungkook's face.

"What?"

"Yes. This," Jungkook grins, who appears excited by the discovery.

"But… *What?* Why would anyone do this to your necromancy? And who? *How?* Because this goes beyond fragmentation. They've altered and damaged your arcane, if your theory is correct,"

Taehyung says half an hour later.

“That’s what we don’t know,” Jungkook shrugs, nestled against Taehyung’s side. “And that is why we need to visit Seohyung and Sungmin.”

“So it would mean that your arcane has never been at its full potential?” Taehyung blurts out and, really.

Really.

The thought should not please him as much as it does, however there is *something* about Jungkook’s necromancy and its potency that ignites certain parts of Taehyung’s ‘reptile brain’, as per Jungkook's descriptions. Mainly the one urging Taehyung to scent and mark in ways that would leave no doubt of whose husband Jungkook is.

“Perhaps, yes,” Jungkook confirms.

“Well.”

Taehyung coughs. It obviously does nothing to abate the ache in his teeth, but it has been a valiant attempt.

He truly needs a moment alone with Jungkook.

“That’s great,” Taehyung says and glares at Jimin when the latter snorts.

“What is it about Revna you wanted to mention?” Jungkook asks next.

Taehyung delegates this discussion to Woobin who launches himself into an in-depth explanation about brumation at Jungkook’s request.

“If we can find who put her in that scroll, we'll have some explanation of what kind of process she's going through," Jungkook muses.

Woobin nods. "Because in her case, her brumation is clearly arcanic as well."

"We'll inquire about this. Thank you," Jungkook smiles. "You seem more at peace."

"I, uh. Yeah." Woobin shrugs. "Talked a bit with them and Jimin."

"Good."

“How are the two of you feeling?” Hoseok wonders.

“The usual. I slept the whole time but I’d wake up every now and then to eat some of Jungkook’s flames. Every time I did, it helped a bit with the pain of the plague,” Taehyung answers.

“Same for me. I can summon my flames, however my eyes don’t change at all. I don’t know if it means I can’t see lost souls anymore. My tattoos haven’t stopped moving as well.” Jungkook tugs at the collar of his shirt to display his shoulder and collarbone adorned with drifting tattoos.

There’s a pull in Taehyung’s eyes. He zones out as he stares at Jungkook’s neck, his vision growing less and less focused. The ache in his teeth worsens.

“…from the plague,” Dahee says. “His death occurred the day after. His daughter has taken...”

Taehyung startles when an elbow jabs his ribs.

“Have some decency,” Jimin quips.

Taehyung kicks Jimin’s shin, but he does avert his gaze from Jungkook.

“It has never been this virulent,” Dahee sighs.

“A good thing is that Cahira and Donovan are well, however Kaiya appears to have grown increasingly angsty. My entry had been quite troublesome, to a point where I wondered if I could enter the forest at all,” Elder Miseon says. “We have collected a few bodies of dragonborns that have succumbed to the spring pulse. They had also died faster than anyone had during previous pulses.”

“So your Elders can find the location of those bodies, however nothing about the plague itself?” Jungkook asks and his brow quirks in this pompous yet endearing way that Taehyung has to conceal his smile at. “How does that work?”

“Our seer Elder uses the remains of his granddaughter to track other bodies, so to speak,” Elder Miseon answers.

“And they can’t track the source of the plague?”

“No. At least not on their own, and certainly not through corpses. I do not know the intricacies of our seer Elder’s arcane, however you are more than welcome to question her once the time of your visit comes,” Elder Miseon smiles, but it is anything but kind.

Taehyung watches with mute entertainment the way Jungkook’s nose faintly curls before he smooths his expression to a forged amiability.

“Of course,” is all that Jungkook says before glancing at Taehyung. “What?”

Taehyung cards a hand at the back of Jungkook’s head, lightly pulling on one of the strands. “Have you been growing more temperamental because of my breaths?”

Jungkook bats Taehyung’s hand away. “I’m not temperamental. You are.”

“Right. Because headbutting with every Elder you encounter makes you an unparalleled beacon of peace.”

“They’ve been annoying me,” Jungkook whispers at Taehyung.

"You don't say," Taehyung chuckles.

The atmosphere surrounding the chatting group has lightened up now that their — albeit temporary — well-being has been confirmed for the next three months. A lingering tenseness still floats in the air, trapping them in this limbo of current relief and incoming apprehension.

“What about Woosung’s daughter?” Jungkook asks Elder Miseon.

“She has been faring well. Woosung has told me that in spite of her feeding on raven nixes, his daughter has not been afflicted by any nightmares, and neither has she recovered any missing memories.”

“So this effect is proper to Revna,” Taehyung concludes.

“As I have mentioned, a visit to the Elders is due from you both. You may ask questions about nixes as well, then,” Elder Miseon says.

While Jungkook’s resentment for the Elders is something that Taehyung can distantly relate to, he can’t help the growing excitement at the prospect of finally entering the sacred land where Elders lives, a dream he has always wanted to fulfill since a young age. “When?”

“In around six days, when one of the absent Elders will return. He would like to be present for your visit.”

“That means we can go to the ball,” Jungkook grins and Taehyung groans. “It’ll be fun.”

Jimin gasps. “We need a few more things for it. You know what that means, Jungkook?”

“Shopping!” Jungkook and Jimin both exclaim in unison.

“We can start this afternoon and finish at Amaris.” Jimin enthusiastically loops an arm around a laughing Jungkook. “We could eat lunch in town?”

"Oh, yes! By the way, Yoon," Jungkook starts and peers at him. "Would it be possible for you to make something to hide my tattoo?"

"No clue. Why?"

"Because depending on what I wear at the ball, my tattoo may show."

Taehyung frowns. "And?"

"I'm worried about Seohyung or someone else making a remark about them there." Jungkook shrugs as an act of dismissiveness, but Taehyung is not blind to the underlying insecurity hidden beneath the gesture. "Tattoos aren't well viewed in this type of society, but I want to be able to still wear whatever I like."

"I can try to make something, yeah. No guarantee I'll succeed."

"Why don't you try to make some fake tattoos the three of us could wear that are similar to Jungkook's instead?" Taehyung proposes. "If we all have arcanic, moving tattoos, no one will question the one Jungkook has. Would be even better if you also create some for Jungkook that will blend with his current one, so that no one notices anything odd about the patterns in his tattoo."

"That would be a *lot* easier to make than trying to hide an ancient arcane," Yoongi agrees.

"Plus it'd be good for business, if the pompous asses at the ball want to wear fake tattoos of their own."

"True."

"I love this idea. It'd be fun," Jungkook grins before he and Jimin dissolve into more chit-chat about their incoming shopping trip.

A disgruntled sigh rises next to Taehyung.

“I guess we can’t bail out of this?” Yoongi laments.

“Not if we want to survive.”

“Figured,” Yoongi grumbles. “I hate these receptions. I attended a few of them and they’re all more insipid than the other.”

“We can agree to be each other’s escape plan if need be, create a distraction, something like that.” Taehyung peers at Yoongi who looks back at him with amusement.

“Deal,” Yoongi eventually agrees.

“Is there anything else to discuss?” Taehyung asks the group, but he’s ignored by half of it, unheard by the rest. “Great.” Taehyung marches toward Jungkook, then without wasting another second, he grabs Jungkook by the waist and slings him over his shoulder.

“Taehyung!”

“See you later,” Taehyung waves off the group while making his way toward his and Jungkook’s house, Jungkook’s protests weakened by the snickers escaping him.

“We have to help him, but I don’t think he will take the news well, nor believe me.”

Yumi finishes her meal, tossing the leftovers to her boulder familiar.

“What should we do… Minsoo and Hyuna haven’t said anything, so it must have not started forming yet, but it will soon. The hunger will worsen.” Her lizard nods and makes a noise. “I know… If only I had the gift Dohyun is keeping away from me… I hate gifts.” Her familiar jumps on her head, gnawing on a strand of her hair. “Right, right. Let’s finish this and give it to him. Hopefully it’ll be good enough for a few days. We'll keep an eye on him anyway.”

Yumi spreads the dark tea leaves in front of her. They stain in scarlet the towel beneath them that absorbs the excess liquid. She then relocates the leaves on a flat rock to dry them in her oven while she lifts a severed finger to her lizard that promptly begins to munch on the flesh and bone.

She remains sited in front of the oven, vigilantly watching the leaves.

Once they have dried, she crumbles them and stores them into a pouch where other altered cinnamon and spices are stored. She hopes Taehyung won't be able to smell anything.

“Let’s see if it helps. I’m still unsure, but if you were right about his changing scent…”

When she downs a vial later that day, the pain that tears through her body is one she has known often, yet has never gotten used to. This potion is worse than those she uses daily, as it goes beyond a human changing appearance. Her bones crack, her skin and flesh shed, all leaving place to a new, smaller appearance.

She shakes herself and emits a chirp at her lizard who curiously peers at her, the two of them now similar in size.

She holds the pouch in her beak and flies through the door her other familiar has made for her.

It doesn't take long for her to see the house.

She perches herself on a branch and shakes her wings. It's dark outside, offering her the cover of the night.

Jungkook and Taehyung are inside, discussing together in the kitchen. They're unaware of the presence of an odd bird amongst others.

Yumi waits.

Even as the hours elapse, she still waits.

The lanterns are snuffed out. Jungkook and Taehyung have gone to bed.

Yumi grabs a hold of her package and flies off.

Finding a way inside the house isn't difficult, to her alarm. *Jungkook should be more careful,* she thinks as she slips through one of the half opened kitchen windows. She can smell the remnants of a meal. Her nose wrinkles.

She finds the jar of tea that she knows Jungkook drinks on a daily basis. She has watched him do so for some time now. She struggles to open the jar with her talons, but she eventually manages to do so as she pushes the lid to the side. Yumi then empties her pouch in the jar, her leaves and spices blending with those already present. She closes back the lid and shakes the jar as best as she can to mix the products inside.

She quietly chirps to herself as she observes her work.

Satisfied with the results, and not wishing to flare off the dragonborn's instincts, she flies out the window and disappears into the night.

"Should I die?"

Jungkook stares at Taehyung.

"My hair, I mean. Dye my hair."

Jungkook has half a mind to punch Taehyung right across his handsome, *stupid face.*

“Kim Taehyung.”

Taehyung barks out a laugh as he dodges the washcloth Jungkook launches in his direction.

“Why are you actively trying to die by my hands?”

“I don’t know.” Taehyung walks behind Jungkook and halts there. He leans to the side as his eyes find Jungkook’s in the mirror, and when he speaks, his timber is low, the word spoken at the back of Jungkook’s ear. “You certainly make death look appealing.”

The way Jungkook’s face bursts into heated flames is unfortunately out of his control, however what he can command is his hand that smacks Taehyung’s shaking shoulder when the latter walks away.

Jungkook pats his flushed cheeks. He’s not certain of how well he will fare with the pretense at the ball and the ensuing *kisses* if a lighthearted tease like this flusters him so much.

He makes his way down the stairs to finish preparing his luggage as he and Taehyung pack for their trip to Amaris.

Jungkook grows hungry at some point, something food does not seem to regulate, and so he eats a few of Taehyung’s storm candies to relieve the hunger. Their effects seem to work less and less, but Jungkook makes no mention of it for now. Instead, he makes sure to also feed Taehyung some of his flames whenever the plague grows too virulent within Taehyung.

The seal on Taehyung’s hemomancy appears to have weakened even more for the past days, a welcomed good news in the barrage of troubles their life has become.

However Revna has yet to wake up.

She has been shedding a bit more, however nothing substantial indicates her awakening soon. The process is slow, but Woobin had reassured Jungkook that snakes usually brumate for a few months, although it commonly happens during winter rather than spring.

Jungkook peers at Revna who’s curled into a ball on a pillow.

He hopes her brumation won’t last so long for her.

“What else did they say?”

“Nothing much,” Taehyung shrugs, who has been recounting this morning's Council meeting. “We told them what happened to me during the pulse. We didn’t mention anything about you, nor about our whole…” He vaguely motions between them with his hand. “Arcane thing. They’re more concerned about another member of the Council dying. It was pretty meaningless. We kept going in circles about the plague but not knowing what to do. We did discuss sharing everything about the plague with our people, but most leaders aren’t keen on that yet.”

“We can figure this out after visiting the Elders.”

“Yeah. We’ll see how that goes.”

Jungkook internally smiles at the way Taehyung’s lips curl around this palpable eagerness in his voice.

“Hello, lovebirds!” Jimin greets from the garden. “Are you ready? I certainly am. I can’t wait to mingle with this holier-than-thou high society. Yoongi is also *ecstatic*."

Jungkook hugs Jimin, Namjoon then a half asleep Yoongi whose eyes are barely open in this early morning.

Namjoon looks around. “Where is she?”

“On her cushion.” Taehyung nods toward the house, prompting Namjoon to follow him. “I made her bags already.”

“Bags? Plural?”

“There’s some toys, food and snacks for her. I also added some of Jungkook’s and I’s clothes in case she misses our scent and feels angsty. You’re also taking a few of her pillows with you so you can swap with a clean one every day since she’s been shedding quite a bit. Make sure to clean her where—" He halts. "Nevermind, actually. Don't clean her. I don't trust you to be careful with her shedding skin. Anyway, if she wakes up, don’t give her too much food at once. I made a list of what other meals she likes if she doesn’t feel like eating what I’ve given you. Oddly enough, she loves spices. She got that from Jungkook. But she can be a picky eater, so don’t cave in. She also got that from Jungkook.”

Jungkook rolls his eyes.

“Right,” Namjoon says with a wavering smile. “Of c—”

“She likes warmth. She's colder than usual right now, so keep her near your fireplace or under a blanket. Don’t let her go out if she asks to. No raven nixes either. No hunting. She’ll contest and sulk, but she’ll obey. As for…”

Jungkook muffles his laugh in his hand as Taehyung continues to firmly enounce rules after warning after more concerned nagging that Namjoon listens to with barely hidden exasperation.

It’s only fifteen minutes later, Namjoon burdened with several bags and Revna in his arms, that he and Taehyung come out of the house.

“One would think she’s moving in with me for a year,” Namjoon mutters.

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” Taehyung backtracks after locking the door. “Should we take her with us? We should take her with us.”

“I can take care of her perfectly well.”

“I don’t trust you.”

Namjoon aims a cold smile at Taehyung. “I will remain polite, as you're wedded to Amari's Prince, but I will ask you to stop nagging me worse than Seohyung ever has.”

Taehyung frowns. “Don’t compare me to her.”

“Stop acting so tyrannical over me babysitting your daughter.”

“She is not—”

For once, Taehyung quietens his rebut at the glower Namjoon levels him with.

“She’ll be fine,” Jungkook says in-between two chuckles. “Your parents will help Namjoon if need be. She’s safe with the three of them.”

“Right,” Taehyung sighs, then pats Revna’s head. “Take care of her.”

“Will do,” Namjoon huffs.

“Take care too,” Taehyung adds.

Surprise washes over Namjoon’s face. When he smiles this time, it’s more honest. “I will. You too. It’s very odd for you to be this amicable to me. I’m not sure if I like it,” he teases.

“Fuck you.”

“Much better.”

Yoongi emits an intelligible sound that sounds like a *‘Hmphgh’* as he summons a flock of giant ravens that hold onto the ropes of the carriage. He steps inside, trailed by Jimin, Jungkook and Taehyung next.

“Have a fun trip,” Namjoon shouts.

Dahee arrives at this moment, landing in her dragon form next to Namjoon before turning to her human self. She walks up to the opened window of the carriage. “Be careful, everyone. Make sure to drink Minsoo’s vials, yes?” She tells Taehyung who nods. “You keep an eye on your brother,” she adds for Jimin. “And you.” She peers at Jungkook.

Jungkook points at himself. “Me?”

“Don’t do anything reckless.”

Jungkook gawks at Dahee.

Taehyung and Jimin break into cackles.

“Wh— Why me! When *he* is here!” He jabs his finger in Taehyung’s direction. “You’re confounding me with your son, Lady Dahee.”

“I am not. You are growing to be more reckless than Taehyung, and *that* is saying something. I do not trust you to remain level-headed in certain circumstances.”

Jungkook mumbles “I trust myself.”

Dahee snickers and ruffles Jungkook’s hair. “I’m teasing you. Have fun. It might be the last time we can afford to do so for the next few months.”

“Yeah, bye.” Taehyung begrudgingly pecks his mother’s cheek at her demand, Jimin doing the same moments later.

“Have a safe trip.”

Jungkook hugs Dahee and Namjoon, then pecks Revna’s crown before the ravens’ wings begin to bat in the air, flying them toward their destination.

When they land in Amaris a couple days later, Taehyung having sped up the travel by flying them himself at some point, the citadel looks somber under the curtains of rain drowning the city and people working outside.

“Well…” Jimin trails off. “Here we go?”

“Let us pray we don't stumble on her today,” Yoongi declares, a wish Taehyung echoes with a nod.

Jungkook looks impassible from where he's peering outside the window.

Taehyung nudges him. "You're alright?"

"Hm? Yes." Jungkook is dressed with a high neck, long-sleeved shirt that hides his tattoos yet at the same time compliments his toned form. Jungkook has, once again, not bothered with his winter coat.

Yoongi is the first one to vacate the carriage, an ink umbrella held by a raven kept above his head. Jimin is next, holding his own ink umbrella shielding him from the rain. Taehyung is next who stands outside and he presents his arm to Jungkook to guide him out of the carriage.

"Why don't you two go inside and figure out which room we'll stay in while Yoongi and I take care of the luggage?" Taehyung proposes to Jungkook while giving him the third umbrella.

"I'm not one for manual labor," Yoongi contests.

"You and I both know your ravens will be doing most of the work," Taehyung retorts.

Yoongi falls mute, however not without a betrayed look aimed at Taehyung.

Jungkook and Jimin jog away without being told twice, snickering to each other when Jimin slips on the wet grass. They bow at the few maids dressed in raincoats who are securing the windows' blinds, preparing the citadel for the approaching storm.

Taehyung begins to take out the luggage from the chest with Yoongi's help. "Is there anything I should know about the guests that will be present at the ball?"

"You should be asking Jungkook."

"I'm asking you."

Yoongi regards him with watchful curiosity. "Make sure to display a united front with Jungkook. It'll be particularly important for this reception. Most of the guests come from influential human nations: emperors, queens, kings, duchesses and more. These people gossip. *A lot.* Just give them something positive for you and Jungkook to blabber about. Be careful of who you strike any deal

with," he adds and produces an umbrella for Taehyung. "I'm sure Jungkook will warn you of who to avoid."

"Any names I should remember?"

Yoongi makes a brief list that Taehyung files at the back of his mind.

"What about any enemies Amaris may have?"

Yoongi scoffs. "Amaris does not have enemies."

"Perhaps not upfront. I'm speaking about the quiet, festering dislike."

"Runalis' rulers aren't fond of Seohyung, nor Jungkook for that matter, but they abhor Seohyung a lot more. The relationship isn't hostile, but it's also not friendly. They trade together, but carefully. I was tasked to survey them a few times in the past."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Yeah." Yoongi closes the emptied chest and peers at Taehyung. "You're planning something?"

"No. I'm curious. I don't want to carelessly act with the wrong people and have it result in negative consequences for Vanae or Jungkook. I have to be on my best behavior."

"Are you physically capable of that?" Yoongi teases but unknowingly voices out Taehyung's uncertainty.

Taehyung lightly kicks Yoongi's shin.

"Actually…" Yoongi trails off, glancing around before reclining against the carriage. "There's something I want to check, but I don't want to bring Jungkook with me. I'm worried about any arcane that may linger there."

"Where?"

"In the basement. Where the whole memory erasure thing happened. I wanted to see if there are some traces of what was done to Jungkook. Every single room of the citadel is guarded in some ways, even more when receptions are held there, but we could use the ball as a distraction and sneak into the basement. I also want to check the chamber where they keep treasures."

"We could check together, and leave Jungkook with Jimin. I don't want us to split up too much."

"Should we tell them?"

Taehyung emits a derisive chuckle. "Yeah. Lies by omission don't end well."

"You certainly know about that."

Taehyung's eyes cast low on the ground. "The fact that he found out the way he did is…"

"Yeah… He told us about it. Wasn't the best, but also not the worst."

"How could this have been any worse, dipshit?"

“Finding your dead corpse, for starters,” Yoongi deadpans.

“You sure know how to comfort someone." Taehyung grabs a few of the luggage, the others flown by Yoongi’s flock of ravens.

“How are you feeling?” Yoongi wonders as they make their way toward the citadel.

Taehyung shrugs. “Like before, just a tad worse. A tad more exhausted. I can tell my breaths are dying faster, but Jungkook’s flames help against the plague.”

“Making him those candies must accelerate the erosion of your breaths too.”

“Not as much as you’d think, and it's nothing compared to what I have to feed the plague with. I’m fine either way. For now, at least.”

“Jungkook hasn’t contested the candies?”

“He tried.” Taehyung surveys Yoongi. “I’m not giving him a choice.”

Yoongi barks out a laugh but his expression turns somber moments later, something between sadness, anger and resignation. “You know about the wishing book.”

“I do.”

“Will you stop him if he tries to use it?”

“If I can, yes.”

“Think you’ll succeed?”

“Probably not, and he knows that. He’s a stubborn viper, isn’t he?”

“Always was,” Yoongi laments with a defeated sigh. “I swear stubbornness swarmed him the moment he took his first breath.”

Taehyung emits a huffed chuckle. “That bad?”

“ *Worse.* So, so much worse when he was younger. He could defy others simply for the sake of doing so before Seohyung… Before *she* got worse with him. It's nice to see him be like this again, actually." Yoongi trails off for a moment as he watches Jungkook and Jimin, the pair chatting together in the citadel’s hallway. “Has he told you about that one time where he had been adamantly refusing to eat because his spoon had been made from steel rather than silver and gold?”

Taehyung bursts into laughter. “No fucking way.”

“He has never really been the typical rich, spoiled brat, but he’d sometimes have those bursts of *‘Oh, right, I’m the heir to one of the wealthiest and most influential human dynasties’.”*

“That reminds me of the day where he had sulked and demanded a higher allowance after ‘only’ receiving 15 000 coins.”

Yoongi shakes his head. “He’s down to earth, but every now and then said earth is made from polished marble slabs.”

“While I’m happy to see you both getting along so well,” Jungkook starts, “must you gossip about me?”

“We didn’t mention your name,” Taehyung and Yoongi say together.

They glare at each other.

“Fuck off,” they both say in unison again.

“Stop that,” Taehyung snips while Yoongi retorts with a “Shut up.”

“They’re just like two peas in a pond, aren’t they?” Jimin obnoxiously coos.

Taehyung ignores him to say “Is Seohyung here?”

“Not yet, but according to the maids, she will be present for the ball. Sungmin is here though, but he has an appointment,” Jungkook answers. “Also, our rooms are on the last floor. They were already prepared, so we can drop our luggage there.”

The group promptly does so, especially Taehyung who’s quite tired from having flown them to Amaris for the major part of the trip.

After Taehyung and Jungkook have stored their belongings in the empty closet in the room that they share, Yoongi and Jimin doing the same in their own bedroom, Jungkook grabs a hold of Taehyung’s wrist and pulls him out of their room.

“I have to show you some places in the citadel that you haven’t seen yet while we're here. I wonder if Sohee is here. Oh and we’ll have to visit the city as well. I’m sure our people will appreciate it, plus there’s a few things I want to buy. Oh my God.” Jungkook halts his rambling to peer at Taehyung. “I’m gonna have to show you the aviary at the top of the east tower. It’s beautiful. You’ll love it. I loved going up there even if I wasn’t allowed to.”

“But Jungkook always finds a way, uh?”

“Indeed,” Jungkook nods with a prideful grin.

Taehyung chuckles. “Let’s do a quick run around. You can properly show me after the ball.”

"Are you tired?"

"A bit."

"We can just rest and head to bed."

"No. Give me a tour." Taehyung places a hand on Jungkook's lower back, lightly pushing him forward. "We can rest later, hm?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." And if Taehyung hadn't been before, he certainly is at the way Jungkoo beams at the answer.

The two of them make their way down the stairs and toward the entrance hall.

A male figure stands in front of the double doors that two guards are about to swing open. The man's head turns around. Taehyung has no clue who the guy is.

Jungkook, on the other hand, gasps.

" *Christian?"*

The man's brows fly up his forehead, his mouth part open. "Jungkook? Holy crap! I mean… By the Gods!"

Jungkook smiles as he tugs Taehyung toward Christian. He dismisses the two guards who scurry away. "Oh God, how long has it been?"

"Fifteen years or so? And please, call me Ian." Christian says through a boyish grin. "Ah. Where are my manners." He bows and extends a hand clad in various — tacky — rings. The guy then takes a hold of Jungkook's fingers and presses a *kiss* on their knuckles. "A pleasure to meet you once more, Prince of Amaris."

Jungkook lifts a hand to hide his bunny smile but it does nothing to conceal the mirth that dances across his face.

Taehyung's gaze snaps on Ian or Christian or whatever the buffoon's name is.

"I was not aware you were now equipped with manners, Ian."

Taehyung feels like he's missing some key element.

Christian grimaces. "If it's any consolation, after my parents heed words of my poor attitude toward you, they had decided to ship me to my aunt. Let's just say that she then spent the next years rectifying my behavior, and she had *not* been kind nor patient about it. Thankfully, it had the desired effects. I'm not the 8 years old kid I used to be."

Everything clicks into place for Taehyung. The realization of who the guy is brings in its path an unexpected annoyance.

Jungkook laughs some more. "That is good to hear."

"I hope you aren't holding any grudges against me anymore?" Christian asks with a tilt of his head, mouth curled around a smile that tries to be charming yet horribly fails to be. "Although I'd understand if you were."

"Water's under the bridge."

Christian heaves a theatrical sigh that Jungkook — for some reasons — finds amusing because he snickers. "Thank God. Wouldn't want to be on Amaris' Prince's bad side, aye?"

"You don't know the end of it," Jungkook playfully answers.

And Christian truly does not. Unlike Taehyung. Not that it is a competition — that Taehyung would win —, but he *does* know Jungkook infinitely more than Christian ever will.

Christian doesn't know *anything* about Jungkook. Hell, they barely recognized each other. He had only met Jungkook once, after all, right? Plus Christian is a simple human, not a dragonborn

coming down from a prestigious chaos heritage. He wouldn't be able to keep Jungkook warm and shield him from a storm. The guy would probably die trying to protect Jungkook from something as simple as a puny thief.

So why do Taehyung's thoughts blare in his mind about a potential danger?

Christian is evidently a harmless, asinine buffoon wearing a summer dress shirt amidst a storm. *That* kind of cretin could never be a threat to a dragonborn like Taehyung. Maybe Christian works for Yumi? Or Seohyung? Or the man with scent?

All of a sudden, Taehyung can't stand the guy anymore.

Christian's gaze drifts on Taehyung, reminding the pair that, yes, Taehyung also exists.

"And this is?"

"Oh!" Jungkook drags Taehyung closer to him. "This is Kim Taehyung, Va—"

"Jungkook's husband," Taehyung interrupts and offers his hand to Christian. He even draws a smile, because he's polite like that.

"*And* Vanae's future leader," Jungkook finishes.

Taehyung and Christian shake hands. Taehyung squeezes harder than is needed. He internally gloats when Christian winces.

"Strong grip," Christian weakly chuckles when Taehyung lets go.

"Apologies. I'm accustomed to dragonborn sturdiness." Taehyung pretends to not feel the way Jungkook pinches his hip in warning.

"I've heard a lot about you two's wedding," Christian continues, and Taehyung is not blind to the doubt that swims in his eyes. "It was quite an unexpected union."

This time, Jungkook's smile does not reach his eyes. "It's been wonderful."

Taehyung wonders at once if Seohyung has perhaps cast some shadow over his and Jungkook's wedding, a concern that Jungkook must be sharing.

"Were you Sungmin's appointment?"

"Yeah! He had to leave when he heard of your arrival, but hopefully you will get to speak with your father."

Jungkook and Christian discuss together about mundane trivialities that Taehyung *does* bother listening to while scrutinizing the guy. Just in case.

Christian has a heavy cloak draped over his shoulders, and there's an air of nonchalance in the way he carries himself, hands tucked in his pants' pockets, hair tousled and clothes faintly wrinkled. The dress shirt is *way* too unbuttoned for the barely starting spring, and it's even more ridiculous when one takes into consideration the storm outside.

The worst in all of this is that Christian has tattoos.

And Jungkook appears to *love* them.

Which Taehyung supposes is ‘cool’ — although Jungkook’s are infinitely more beautiful —, but it becomes less cool when Taehyung notes the way Jungkook’s gaze flits across the top of the Christian’s chest. Jungkook even makes a remark about them, something about *‘wonderful line work’* and a few other praises that Taehyung wants to scoff at. Christian’s answer is half cocky, half a complaint about how his parents have disapproved of his stylistic choices.

Jungkook laughs at this.

When Christian makes another quip about how stuck up high society is, Jungkook descends into laughter again. When they briefly mention Seohyung, trailed by a remark Christian makes about how unpleasant the Queen is, Jungkook snickers even more.

Nothing Christian has said warrants *this* much hilarity.

Taehyung can’t help but think that Christian is the type of man Jungkook fancies.

The guy has a laid-back and carefree attitude that Jungkook tends to be drawn to. He cracks some unfunny jokes, but Jungkook still appears to find them hilarious. He also swears here and there, an occurrence that clearly amuses Jungkook. And, again, the guy has tattoos, another plus point for the tattooed necromancer.

“I’m used to it,” Jungkook says and points at Taehyung after Christian has apologized for his language.

“You swear too,” Taehyung contests.

“Don’t ruin my reputation,” Jungkook mumbles through a pout.

“You’re a dragonborn, right?” Christian asks.

Taehyung does *not* pump out his chest like a prideful hatchling, but he nods his chin higher than is required. “A chaos dragon,” he even discloses for no particular reason.

“Oh wow,” Christian breathes out both in awe and alarm.

As he should.

“It’s odd I’ve never heard your name. We trade with dragonborns.”

“You may have heard his mother’s name, since she’s the current leader. A certain Lady Dahee?”

“Oh yes! It does ring a bell,” Christian smiles.

Taehyung peers at Jungkook. “Is he the prince you’ve told me about in the cave?”

“I’m surprised you remember,” Jungkook says, as if Taehyung would forget something like that. “But yes, that’s him.”

“Eh?” Christian gaze drifts between Taehyung and Jungkook. “Jungkook spoke about me?”

“He mentioned in passing having once nursed a fleeting infatuation for a prince so dastardly the crush had vanished within a few hours.” Taehyung hopes his smile doesn’t come off as hostile as it feels.

Christian has the decency to avert his gaze while Jungkook regards Taehyung with a warning look.

“I’m truly sorry about that,” Christian says, discarding Taehyung to settle his attention on Jungkook. “You had a crush on me?” Christian wonders, and Jungkook’s answer is a brief shrug accompanied by a smile that, unlike Christian's, *is* charming. “I had one on you too! Why did I have to act like this and miss my chance? I can't believe this…"

What Taehyung can’t believe is that he, himself, has purposefully brought this subject on the table. That is not how he had wanted the conversation to go. At all.

Is *he* an idiot?

“Uh? Really? But you were so…”

“Mean? Insolent? I know,” Christian grunts, dragging a jeweled palm down his face. “I was intimidated by you. I was lost on how to approach you. I guess it was a pulling on pigtails type of thing. A horrible thing, but… Yeah. I’m sorry about that.”

“Never in a million years would I have guessed your behavior was born from some kind of puppy love, but I suppose it explains a lot.”

“Jungkook, it’d be impossible for any sensible person to not fall a little for you,” Christian says.

“I’d beg to differ.” Jungkook’s retort comes off as playful, eliciting a light chuckle out of Christian.

“You should not. You were always so kind, smart and altruistic, it also never hurt that you were and are still impossibly beautiful,” Christian carries on. “We had only properly met once, but I had seen you from afar a few times.”

“I’m sure we’ll meet more often in the future, as I’ll soon be taking full duties in regard to trades."

“Certainly.” Christian glances at Taehyung. “As wonderful as meeting you again under kinder circumstances has been, I must take my leave.”

“It was nice seeing you again, Ian,” Jungkook responds in kind.

Christian bows with a flurry that, *again,* draws a laugh out of Jungkook.

“It was a pleasure meeting you as well, leader of Vanae.”

“Likewise,” is all that Taehyung answers.

Christian walks toward the exit. The two guards jog back into the room. When they open the double doors, Taehyung has to cough to hide his snort when Christian is immediately whipped by the stormy rain.

“I might have underdressed,” Christian grumbles.

No shit.

“Be careful on your way back,” Jungkook says.

Christian throws a thumbs up. “Yup. Bye Prince!”

Once Christian has disappeared into the raging storm outside that will hopefully be the cretin's demise, Taehyung helps the two guards swing the doors shut that struggle to close against the strong gusts of wind.

“He has changed *so* much for the better. I almost didn't recognize him. He was so much more uptight before? Dressed very pristine, not a strand of hair misplaced. Not swearing at all but a lot of arrogance to counter this. I never thought he’d have tattoos either,” Jungkook fawns over as he loops an arm around Taehyung’s to guide them through the hallway. “Why would you mention the crush though…”

“Thought he should know he was a piece of shit to you.”

“He was 8 years old, Tae.”

“An 8 years old piece of shit.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter. It’s louder than any laugh elicited by Christian. “You’re fine with me speaking to him?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Taehyung has to halt when Jungkook does.

Jungkook is observing Taehyung with an intent that Taehyung cannot for the life of him decipher, but that does leave him a little restless the longer Jungkook silently watches him.

Jungkook’s head tilts to the side.

“What,” Taehyung mutters, shuffling on his feet.

“Nothing,” Jungkook eventually says and has them resume their walk.

“That 20 minute stare was not nothing.”

“It is to you,” Jungkook declares. “You really don’t mind?”

“Why would I care about you talking to a guy for whom you had a crush on for two hours on a Sunday afternoon when you were 9 years old? It doesn’t matter.”

“Good point.”

And it is.

A good point, that is.

But it still does not explain why a growing irritation swells within Taehyung, uncomfortably twisting in his guts.

“He’ll most likely be present at the ball, if he’s in Amaris right now,” Jungkook announces.

Right.

Right.

The underdressed cretin will obviously be there. Because that’s Taehyung’s luck.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“If you say so,” Jungkook shrugs, but he looks oddly pleased from where he’s hanging onto Taehyung’s arm.

Jimin and Yoongi startle when Taehyung barges inside their suite.

"What is wrong with y—"

"Yoongi," Taehyung interrupts Jimin. "How well can you design the tattoos? They need to have good line work and whatnot. I don't want them to look cheap."

Yoongi squints at Taehyung. "Haven't started yet. Why do you care?"

Huh.

While Jungkook had left to take a wee, Taehyung had not thought of an excuse when he had power walked out of the bedroom to enter Jimin and Yoongi's adjacent room and make his demand.

"Because, as I said, if we all wear well designed tattoos, no one will bat an eye at Jungkook's. I just want to make sure they'll look good on us."

Elders.

God, even.

Not only had Taehyung truly been a one of a kind genius when he had come up on the spot with such an astute idea yesterday about the fake tattoos, but it appears that he has also been granted the gift of foresight, as the tattoos will now serve a newly crafted goal.

"If you're that concerned about it, why don't you draw your own, huh?" Yoongi says and waves him off.

Taehyung wordlessly exits the bedroom, already designing ideas in his mind.

Jimin closes the door behind Taehyung, reminded of how he and Yoongi had fleetingly spied on Taehyung and Jungkook earlier. The image of a certain Christian that Jungkook had been speaking

with flickers in his mind.

"He's jealous, isn't he?" Yoongi wonders.

"Yup."

"Does he know it?"

"Nope."

Yoongi barks out a laugh. This endearing glint of mischievousness shines in his eyes and curls his lips. "Want to bet on how long it'll take him to realize?"

Jungkook's fingers shake when they yank his top off his chest.

He peers at himself in the mirror, his gaze never straying away from it.

He's not certain if it's a trick of his eyes. It's hard to tell amidst the shifting lines of his tattoo, however there's a patch of skin at the upper center of his chest that appears to be taking a darker color. It's more of a yellowish brown and gray at the center, with a hint of purple. There's a smell too, something rancid that suffuses his nose.

The patch grows and grows.

It spreads to his arms, hands and fingers. It covers his face, lips and lids. His eyes are paler, almost grey. They look drier by the minute. It becomes harder to see, but Jungkook can catch the way the skin on his body sinks onto his bones.

Or the way a dark hole opens in the middle of his chest that widens and widens.

The pain is back. Its hunger too.

Or perhaps it is the opposite.

Or something else.

It hurts anyway.

He's empty.

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

Nothing is enough.

Jungkook reaches a hand toward himself in the mirror. It passes through it and touches his own face. Two darkening fingers crawl up to his eye. They press at the corners and never stop as they

sink deeper through the socket.

He holds something.

He needs to be full.

Fulfilled.

Satiated.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hur—

Jungkook consumes what he sees.

Chapter End Notes

I'm already working on CH31 and hope to have it ready soon!! I really want to get back on a more frequent updating schedule but it's been difficult as you've seen 😞 I'd love for SLB to be finished by the end of the year/early next year bc I really want to start writing (UN)LOVABLE's ao3 ver, so I'll try my best to make it happen without rushing anything of course 🤍

I took liberties about the whole medical reasoning behind Taehyung's hair turning ashy, but I've read studies about how the immune system and having gray hair can be correlated, which was very interesting to read!! (plus I thought blonde tae will forever be superior and so is layover era, and I had found that one photo of tae not long ago that just sooo slb tae coded…)

Hope you've enjoyed this chapter, and once again, thank you so so much for your patience with the slow updates and for still reading this story after a year and a half, it means the world to me and I truly mean it 🫂🤍

— Character's visuals —

Taehyung 2.0
Christian/Ian

🎁 Lovely gift time made my SLB lovely readers 💛🎁

❧ Art of Jungkook from the beginning of this chapter made by @sunkjjk

❧ Playlist of desi songs for SLB made by zeephyric
❧ A Taekook moodboard made by VminLover95
❧ Moodboard of Taekook made by Bambi_koo12

❧ Edits/poster teaser for Kaiya made by yooniedumplin
❧ Edits/posters for Taekook made by yooniedumplin

Series of beautiful arts made by lesbiansexdevil T____T 🤍

❧ Art of Jungkook from the scene where they bleed to enter Kaiya made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Drawing of Taekook cuddling made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Jungkook wearing the lingerie Taehyung gifted to him made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Taehyung and Jungkook "nesting" XD made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Yumiii made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Taekook cuddling in bed made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Art of Taehyung bathing Jungkook made by lesbiansexdevil
❧ Drawing of Taekook feat Jungkook wearing Taehyung's shirt (+ a funny thought bubble XD) made by lesbiansexdevil

Chapter 31: The Gala

Chapter Summary

Amaris' 86th Annual Gala begins, bringing in its path new people, gifts, and flustered discoveries.

Chapter Notes

✨ Song recommendations ✨
(I HIGHLY recommend putting on at least the music at 3) 🫶)

1) Playlists of ballroom classical musics you can choose from and put on until *"Taehyung yanks his arm from Jimin's grasp as he strides through..."*: Baroque Ballroom Ambience| Classical Music From Baroque Era, Songs From Bridgerton | Instrumental Pop Song Covers |, Bridgerton | Pop Instrumentals Inspired by The Hit Netflix Show, Fairy Tale Ball | Fantasy Music & Ambience

2) Then you can put this slower one on until *"Every guests' attention is on Taehyung and Jungkook."* : Gala Night | D&D/TTRPG Music | 1 Hour

3) After this line, put this music on until *"The guests shuffle behind Jungkook, some drinking from..."* : Song

4) Then I don't really have any rec songs, but I was listening to this on loop for the balcony scene that follows 🤓: Song

Cw:

1) Blood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jungkook's eyes fly open with a gasp.

He jerks away from the hand touching his back.

"You're fine, it's me."

Jungkook peers at Taehyung, the two of them sitting on the bed. Jungkook remembers having settled down on the mattress while waiting for Taehyung to come back, having felt a tad sleepy after the trip. He must have fallen asleep.

“What happened? Has someone come in?”

“No.” Jungkook lifts a hand to his throat.

He peers at his arms and hands.

They’re of their regular colors, no darker patches present anywhere. When he lifts his shirt to survey his chest, the lines of the tattoo are still moving, however he can’t spot any discoloration on his skin. The pain is still present, worse, as though a hand is gripping his organs and pushing them around.

“Hey.” Taehyung wipes the sweat off Jungkook’s temple. “Talk to me.”

“I—” Jungkook croaks out but halts how parched he feels. He drinks from the glass of water Taehyung hands to him a minute later. “I had a nightmare? I think?”

“A nightmare?”

“I was… I was rotting, and so hungry. I was so hungry.” Jungkook touches his chest where the ache wrenches. “I’ve never felt anything like it. I was so famished I ate my—” His hand flies to his eye.

The organ is still present, unlike the rancid taste that had suffused his mouth.

“What could this mean?” Taehyung wonders, a frown etching his face.

“I’m not sure. I’ve never had a dream like that before.”

“Have you eaten something spoiled at home?”

“No. Just regular food you made.”

“You’ve been eating and drinking more than usual since the pulse, though. Your body must be compensating for something,” Taehyung muses as he makes a few storm candies for Jungkook. Jungkook munches on them, but they barely abate the hunger. “Did it help?”

“Slightly. Not enough.”

“What kind of sustenance do you believe you need?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if this is what I need? Dunno, Tae.”

“It’s alright. We’ll figure it out, yeah?” Taehyung is tender when he cards a hand through Jungkook’s hair, prompting Jungkook to lean against the touch.

Jungkook heaves a deep sigh before slumping atop the bed. “I’ve witnessed all sorts of repulsive things because of my necromancy, but I’ve never been an active participant in one.”

“What happened in the dream exactly?”

“I ate my own rotten eye.”

Taehyung has the decency to not wince, or perhaps he’s simply used to the hideous sides of Jungkook’s arcane.

“And I’ve seen memories of people delving into cannibalism due to starvation, but eating my own eye is something else entirely,” Jungkook mumbles.

“Did it taste good at least?”

Jungkook’s closed lids fly open to stare at Taehyung who's leaning to the side on a hand.

Jungkook bursts into laughter and he does not stop, even when his sides hurt from the snickers and inelegant snorts that riddle through him. When he eventually finds his composure again, he meets Taehyung’s fond gaze, a smile floating on the latter’s lips. “You’re an idiot.”

“Made you laugh though.”

Jungkook sits up to brace himself on Taehyung’s knee and lean closer to him. “As per your Machiavellian plan?”

“Perhaps.”

Jungkook shakes his head with a smile. “Can we take a quick shower and lay down? You’re tired, and I’m pretty sleepy too after that dream.”

“Yeah, let’s. Want me to wash your hair?”

“Mhm,” is all that Jungkook says, allowing himself to be pulled toward the bathroom as Taehyung closes the door behind them.

The preparations for the ball are *exhausting*.

Taehyung would go as far as saying that they have sapped him out of his energy more than any storm making may have ever done.

He’s prompted — *forced* — to join Jungkook and Jimin during their shopping endeavors. Yoongi has been dragged for it as well, and the grumbling warlock who shares Taehyung's dislike for hours on end of browsing through shops has proven himself to be a reliable company. The two of them at least get to pass time by sharing complaints and brooding in their corner together while the other excited pair runs across the streets.

Thankfully for Taehyung and Yoongi, Jungkook and Jimin both disappear together for the remainder of the day after having whispered to each other about Elders knows what. Taehyung isn't very keen on finding out what this may be about, and if Yoongi's narrowed eyes are any given, neither is the warlock.

By the end of the second day of their stay at the citadel, Jungkook and Taehyung have both bought their garments — *plural*, of course — for the reception.

Jungkook has been happy.

He hasn't cried once. He's smiling, laughing and rambling about this and that.

So while Taehyung may not be fond of this kind of ostentatious receptions, he still welcomes the distraction and visit to Amaris that has been doing wonders for Jungkook's mood.

"Taehyung?"

Taehyung, sprawled on the couch of their suite, looks up from the book to survey Jungkook. "Yeah?"

"I have a request." Jungkook's hands are clasped behind back as he rocks back and forth on the ball of his feet.

Taehyung bites back a smile at Jungkook’s lisp and evasive gaze. "I’m listening."

Jungkook marches toward Taehyung. He sits down on the side of the sofa. Then, while fiddling with his wedding ring, he says "May I have some of your blood?"

Taehyung blinks once.

He has heard all sorts of odd remarks from Jungkook, however this one might be the most uncanny demand this far.

"You want some of my blood."

"Yes."

Taehyung closes his book. "Alright."

"Really?"

"How much do you need?"

"Well… It depends. Do I give you the more socially acceptable answer, or do I give you the honest one?"

"You'll have to explain to me what's socially acceptable about asking for my blood on a bright Friday morning at crack ass of dawn."

Jungkook levels Taehyung with a stony stare. "*Taehyung*."

"*Jungkook*."

Jungkook rolls his eyes, but they cast down moments later as he mumbles his reply. "Need a couple bottles… If you can! Because it's a lot, and I'd rather not speed up the process of your death."

"Now?"

Jungkook nods. "If possible?"

"Do you have the—"

Jungkook brandishes two glass bottles before Taehyung can finish his sentence. There's a palpable buzz that is echoed by his barely contained smile and the eagerness that shines in his eyes.

"Right." Taehyung takes the bottle as he rises to his feet. He makes his way to the small kitchen where he rummages to find a knife. He does not waste any time and carefully snips at a vein as he holds his arm over a bottle, using his healing breath to regenerate his blood. "What is this for?"

He peers at Jungkook when he's not given any answer.

Jungkook is looking at Taehyung in a way that he can only describe as *soft*, something tender and misty in it that has Taehyung looking away from.

"You'll know later," Jungkook quietly says, resting his head against Taehyung's shoulder.

A couple hours later, Taehyung is dragged back onto the couch by Jungkook who rests a tray brimming with snacks and beverages minutes later.

"You need to rest now," Jungkook orders as he stores the two bottles of blood in a leather bag and walks toward the exit door that he opens.

"Did he accept?" Jimin wonders.

"Yes," Jungkook grins.

"Of course he did," Jimin rolls his eyes. "Let's hurry then."

Jungkook rushes back toward Taehyung to plant a peck on his cheek. "I'll see you later!"

"Sure thing," Taehyung waves back, eyes narrowing at the wink Jimin sends his way.

The ball is in a few hours.

They have yet to stumble on Seohyung or Sungmin, partially due to the rulers' absence, but also due to the fact that Taehyung and Jungkook had been visiting Amaris' city, discussing with the people there and being pulled to this and that shop by the excited owners.

However Taehyung does not expect the torture that befalls on him in the form of a viper straddling him.

"I said no."

"Why not!"

"Because I said so."

"You are utterly, horrifyingly, *boring."*

"Tough shit. Get off."

"It's just some golden specks on your eyes. I won't even use any eyeshadow for you. Everyone will wear some makeup. We must too."

“Since when do you abide by the norm?”

“Since now.”

Taehyung pinches Jungkook’s hip. “It’s uncomfortable and itchy, and I know because Jimin tried makeup on me before.”

“No offense to Jimin, but my cosmetic products are of higher qualities than his.”

Taehyung snorts. “Still.”

“Come on,” Jungkook whines and rubs his nose against Taehyung’s neck.

“No.”

“Please?”

“I said no. Leave me alone.”

Five minutes later, Taehyung finds himself installed on a stool, arms crossed over his chest.

Defeated.

“Stop frowning so much,” Jungkook says, hunched forward and holding Taehyung’s face with a tight grip. “You’re making it more difficult to apply the glitter.”

“Good.”

Jungkook smacks Taehyung’s chest with the back of his hand.

Nearly half an hour passes before Jungkook straightens up with a smile. “I made it a bit messy, so that even if you scratch your eyes, it won’t ruin the look. Just be careful to not get any of the specks inside your eye.”

“Is it done?”

“Yes.”

Jungkook pulls Taehyung toward the bathroom where he shuffles Taehyung in front of the mirror.

Taehyung observes himself.

He has to admit he quite likes the look. It’s *shiny*, but it compliments the golden hues of his skin without dipping into those ‘too much’ waters. The only remaining problem is the mess of ashen patches his hair is.

“What do you think?”

“I like it. It’s simple,” Taehyung answers and smiles at the way Jungkook visibly preens under the praise, his ears flushed. “Thank you.”

“I thought you’d like it more simple.”

“I do.”

Jungkook muffles his happy chuckle against Taehyung's shoulder before pushing him out of the bathroom. "Now it's my turn to get ready, so leave me be."

"How long will it take?"

"About 3 hours or so?"

Taehyung gawks at Jungkook who arches a brow at him. "I'll be out with Jimin then, and get dressed there. Yoongi will be on the way."

"Okay. See you later!" Jungkook slams the door in Taehyung's face.

Taehyung stares at it for a moment. His knuckles rattle against the door.

It opens seconds later.

"What is it?" Jungkook wonders.

Taehyung points at his own cheek.

"You're—" Jungkook chuckles before stepping out of the bathroom and placing a kiss on Taehyung's cheek. "Better?"

"Don't slam the door on my face like that again, brat," Taehyung warns, to which Jungkook heaves a deep, petulant sigh.

"See you later, dear husband of mine," Jungkook croons and slowly pushes the door shut, partially hidden behind it. It loudly slams at the last inch.

"Fucking brat," Taehyung grumbles, ignoring the snickers that elevate in the bathroom.

He makes his way to Jimin and Yoongi's suite that he enters right as Yoongi is about to step out.

"I've got everything ready," Jimin announces.

"He's in the bathroom," Taehyung tells Yoongi. "Keep an eye on him."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't patronize me," Yoongi waves him off. "And don't forget to put on the tattoos. They're on the bed," he says before leaving the room.

"Sit," Jimin orders and points at the chair settled before him. "We've got work to do."

Taehyung does, however not without a certain hesitation, side-eyeing the materials lined up on the small table next to him. "Be careful to not ruin the makeup."

"Should have done that *after."*

"And spoil the surprise?" Taehyung props his arms on the armrests. His fingers drums nervously there. "Do you think he'll like it?"

Jimin barks out a laugh. "You've got nothing to worry about."

"What if he doesn't like it though? Maybe being blonde doesn't suit me."

“You’ll be fine,” Jimin says and pats Taehyung's shoulder. “He’ll love it. Trust me.”

Taehyung curtly nods, tilting his head back when Jimin wraps a towel around his neck.

“How are you feeling?” Jimin asks Taehyung, as everyone has been doing lately.

“I’m fine. The usual. I’m more concerned about Jungkook and what happened to him.”

“There’s a world that exists where you don’t have to mention Jungkook at every breath you take, but I suppose it’s not this one, is it?”

A warmth fills Taehyung’s face. “Fuck off. I don’t do that.”

“Whatever makes you sleep at night,” Jimin teases as he combs through Taehyung’s hair.

“Are *you* alright?”

“Yup. Feeling better. It was just… Was difficult. To see you like this during the pulse,” Jimin says with a small chuckle. “Wouldn’t recommend it *at all.* But you’re fine now.”

“I am. I mean it. I won’t die so easily.”

“No one is letting you do so anyway,” Jimin tuts. “Even Woobin was concerned. He asked me about you after he and I left the house.”

“Fucker can show some sympathy, color me surprised,” Taehyung says but it lacks its usual bite.

“You know, he…” The comb Jimin holds pauses in Taehyung’s hair. “He’s giving me a second chance. He genuinely wants to. I didn’t think he would after I ran away and left him alone with Seungwon.”

“And you deserve that chance. You were a kid too, yet you had to carry so much on your shoulders. What Seungwon may have done to Woobin wasn’t your doing.” Taehyung’s head turns to peer up at Jimin. Jimin’s gaze is misty, face frowned with evident guilt. “I’m sure Woobin knows this as well.”

“I hope so. In spite of everything, I still love him. I’d like for him to be my little brother, truly, this time.”

“Just give time to him and yourself too. Plus he claimed that he’s not interested in having a family, but it’s easy to see that it's exactly what he craves. He could become family.”

“To you?”

Taehyung faces forward. “Don’t push it.”

“Saw that mist in your eyes when he cried. You’re not fooling me.”

“Shut up.”

“Even apologized to him. You're soft for h—”

Taehyung swivels around to punch Jimin’s leg but the latter swiftly slips out of the way.

“Stop moving unless you want me to bleach your fucking eyes, stupid idiot.”

“Then shut up and get to work.”

Taehyung is fully dressed in the garment he and Jungkook had settled upon.

He likes the designs of the tattoos — even if they’re hidden for the most part — because they don’t seem to have any actual design at first glance. They’re more of a painting made with shapeless curves and strokes that resemble what a brush of jet black ink would draw. Taehyung can still see the meticulousness Yoongi has crafted into them.

The white suit he’s wearing is a tad more classy and ornamented than what Taehyung would commonly wear, however it still remains muted enough to fit into his style. Some silvery accents pepper the outfit, along with the white gold and pearly necklace draped around his neck.

Taehyung had asked Jungkook if he should wear some kind of shirt beneath the vest, however Jungkook had looked so offended at the question that Taehyung had reneged the thought with a barely contained laugh.

Taehyung sighs to himself.

He turns away from the mirror to leave Jimin’s room. He climbs down the large staircase, a hand in his pocket, the other fiddling with one of the blonde strands dangling across his forehead, a little apprehensive of Jungkook’s reaction to the new look.

Jimin whistles when he sees Taehyung.

“My, my, my,” Jimin says in-between two claps, the golden and silver jewelry wrapped around the horns on his head clicking together when his head turns. “Cleaning up pretty well.”

“You too,” Taehyung huffs as he observes Jimin and Yoongi’s outfits, the two dressed in black with similar golden accents here and there, both wearing the same eye makeup.

“Do you think there will be some dragonborns at the ball?” Jimin questions Yoongi.

“Certainly. Considering Amaris and Vanae’s union, dragonborn guests will be expected. I’m pretty sure this reception will be the largest one Amaris has ever hosted. I wouldn’t be surprised if even elusive people will be present to catch a glimpse of Amaris’ Prince and Vanae’s leader.”

Jimin’s dragon tail that had been shifting from side to side curls around Yoongi’s waist, pulling him closer. “Well then. It won’t cause any problem for me to have some of my draconic traits out in the wild, will it?”

“A bit late to ask,” Yoongi grumbles amidst his blush.

Jimin’s head tilts to the side, a wolfish smile stretching his lips. “Excellent.”

Taehyung looks away from the nauseating pair.

“How about having your tail out? Or maybe your horns?” Jimin says. “Give humans something to rave about.”

Taehyung grimaces. “I’ll pass. They can rave about you.”

“What a bore.”

“Where’s Jungkook?”

“On the way. He was finishing getting prepared.”

“It’s been over *three* hours,” Taehyung gawks.

“Don’t ask me what is taking so long,” Yoongi shrugs, who hasn’t even bothered buying a second outfit for the feast. “You’d think—”

“I’m here!” Jungkook’s voice rings from above.

The sound of rapid footsteps and clacking dress shoes echo in the corridor.

Taehyung’s spine straightens up. He folds his hands behind his back as he stiffly turns to face the staircase. Nervousness rises in him.

“I couldn’t find my shoes, and then I couldn’t find the jewelry for hands. I—” Jungkook’s head lifts as he halts at the top of the stairs. His gaze finds Taehyung’s.

Taehyung’s hands tighten behind his back as a breath slips past his parted lips.

All he can do is stare.

If death were to be incarnated, Taehyung believes that it is the appearance it would adorn.

What he notices first is the tattoo, an ever lasting, ever moving blanket of raven ink and delicate lines. They appear aimless and accidental, yet Taehyung is certain a divine being must have painted them, perhaps even Death itself, who has taken its time to forge everything that makes Jungkook, its most cherished and adored muse. It would explain why Jungkook has chosen a bone-like armature as his top that gracefully envelops his chest

Taehyung can’t help but wonder if it is truly made from bone, if Jungkook has been daring enough to do so.

Taehyung hopes so.

His Prince of Death would be the sole one to wear them with such exalted grace, after all.

“Oh…” Jungkook exhales. His gaze has not left Taehyung’s for one second either. “Taehyung…”

Taehyung does not spare a glance at Jimin and Yoongi when he speaks. “Leave us be.”

“Yup.”

“What?”

“Come on.”

“Why?” Yoongi argues.

“Let’s give them a minute.”

Jimin and Yoongi’s footsteps quieten then vanish.

Taehyung and Jungkook are left alone.

The airy pans of Jungkook’s pants drag along the stairs behind him as he makes his descent. He’s the one to reduce the distance between them, Taehyung rooted on his spot.

Jungkook’s eyes are ornamented by golden freckles similar to Taehyung’s, however sharpened by some reddened shadows on his lids that renders his gaze more vivid, so much so that Taehyung would look away if he hadn't been so enraptured by the sight.

“God, you…” Jungkook reaches a hand toward Taehyung’s ashen strands, caressing one of them between his fingertips. “You look like an angel,” Jungkook breathes out in an awe that Taehyung does not feel befitting to be the recipient of, yet is the grantor of for his prince.

“I certainly don’t feel like one.”

“Nor act like one,” Jungkook chuckles, his curving lips colored in a faint rosy tint. “I love the hair.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm.” Jungkook’s gaze shies away from Taehyung’s. He flattens his palms across Taehyung’s shoulders, thumbing at the skin and bumping across the chains as they skid down Taehyung’s chest. There’s a sole button at the bottom that he unfastens, giving himself just enough room to slip his hands past the lapels and cup Taehyung’s waist. “You look beautiful, Tae,” Jungkook murmurs and tucks his face in Taehyung’s neck.

One of Taehyung’s palms finds its place on Jungkook’s lower back. He stills when cold metal meets his skin.

He pulls Jungkook away from him and turns him around.

A golden jewelry falls down Jungkook’s back. It’s in the shape of spine, ribs and shoulders blades bones, hugging Jungkook’s back. He’s wearing an equally golden hair stick jeweled with rubies in the high bun at the back of his head, the rest of his hair flowing freely across his nape.

Taehyung cradles the waist, his thumbs kneading at the skin where the golden spine ends between the dimples of Jungkook’s lower back.

“Seohyung won’t be pleased about my outfit.”

“Let her whine if she must.” Taehyung wants to say more but he’s distracted by the way the jewelry of his fingers trace a path along Jungkook’s back, contentment flickering in him when Jungkook tilts toward the touch. He curls an arm around Jungkook and turns him once more. “Is it made from bones?” He asks and surveys the upper part of the garment.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Jungkook chuckles. “Why do you sound disappointed?”

“I was thinking it would be fitting, and that you’d wear them well.”

Jungkook’s smile turns into something cheeky and playful. “I have better things to wear, don’t worry. I don’t want to advertise yet that I’m a necromancer, hence the lack of bones. However, I also don’t want to hide my proclivities for the morbid, hence the bone imitation.”

“Good. You shouldn’t have to hide.”

Taehyung noses at the back of Jungkook’s ear, mindful of the top’s collar. Jungkook smells especially good tonight, the grim floral swathing Taehyung’s senses and prompting his mouth to part open to engorge on it better.

His teeth ache.

There isn’t any m—

Jungkook suddenly hisses.

Taehyung jerks away from him as a sting erupts on his lip.

He watches the way a bead of blood forms at the back of Jungkook’s ear. “I’m sorry. Shit. Sorry. That wasn’t me. I mean, it was me, but also not. That was my wind breath,” Taehyung says and pats the benign cut on his lip.

Jungkook lifts a hand to his mouth as his nose cutely scrunches, eyes closing into crescents. His mirthful gaze turns sharper seconds later, head lolling to the side. “I wonder what you must have been musing about for your breath to enact your thoughts.”

Taehyung does not answer. He zeroes in on the thin trickling blood that slowly glides down. It’s greedy when he smears the blood with his thumb, drawing a swirl that he carries down Jungkook’s throat to the ruby necklace.

It’s another kind of makeup — *mark,* a treacherous, draconic voice corrects — Jungkook will adorn tonight, this one more raw and intimate.

“Don’t hide it."

A flash of surprise washes across Jungkook’s face that is concealed when he ducks his head. He holds onto Taehyung’s arm and buries his face there, away from Taehyung’s view.

Taehyung’s shoulder shakes. “You’re alright?”

“Yes.”

“Why so flustered, if so?”

Jungkook mutters intelligibly and pushes them forward, the two of them making their way out of the citadel. “Stop pointing out things like that, I told you before. And I'm not flustered.”

“Could’ve fooled me with that beet red face."

“Stop it!” Jungkook lifts his head just enough to glare at Taehyung, but promptly lowers it again. He nibbles Taehyung’s arm. “It’s a lot to take in, alright? I’m not used to your hair, a—and… It’s—I mean. Yes. Looks good. Or something.”

“Or something,” Taehyung playfully hums, pleased to know that Jungkook appreciates the new look.

Jungkook lets go of Taehyung to stride ahead of him. “You’re annoying.”

Taehyung combs a hand through the hair at the base of Jungkook’s neck as they walk out of the building. His gaze lowers there when he brushes a strand aside to expose the skin.

The ache in his teeth resumes. Taehyung opts to clamp his hand on Jungkook’s nape to repress the rising craving.

“Done canoodling?” Yoongi questions.

“Shut up,” Jungkook snips.

“Nice makeup,” Jimin taunts with a glance at Jungkook’s ear.

Jungkook flushes and even flips an elegant, jeweled middle finger at Jimin.

The brightness of the second citadel clashes against the dark sky of the night.

The chandeliers, lanterns and more illuminate the interior, casting their light to the building’s facades and entrance. Transportation vessels are parked in front of the citadel, the horses kept inside a fenced part of the vast garden and taken care of by the valets scurrying around to neatly arrange the plethora of carriages.

The group steps out of their own carriage.

Yoongi’s ravens dissipate in a splash of ink.

“We should get inside first,” Jimin tells Yoongi. “Since Taehyung and Jungkook will be the pièce de résistance, if you will.”

“Yeah, I’d rather avoid the attention,” Yoongi agrees.

“I know,” Jimin says with a smile that Yoongi mirrors.

The two of them hold hands as they enter the citadel and disappear inside.

Taehyung peers at Jungkook when the latter sighs. “Nervous?”

Jungkook nods. “It’s different from other galas I’ve attended.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll be there as a married man for the first time. Because I don’t know what to expect with Seohyung. Because it could be a trap. Because I don’t know how well I can hid—” Jungkook stops himself.

“How well you can…?”

Jungkook shakes his head. “Should we discuss the pretense?”

Taehyung does not press Jungkook. Instead, he follows the change in the conversation. “We don’t have to worry about it anymore. We can just be ourselves, don’t we?”

Jungkook stares at Taehyung, his gaze unreadable. “You’re right, but we should still kiss each other here and there.”

“That was a given.”

“I’m worried Seohyung may have raved her mouth about me not fulfilling my duties to you since the last time we visited her. I wouldn’t put it past her. God knows she revels in humiliating me.” Jungkook exhales through his nose, the muscles of his jaw shifting. “She may have complained about us having not brought an heir yet.”

Taehyung’s nose curls. “We can’t *make* an heir, and we’ve barely been married for three months.” Plus isn’t their heir already decided with Revna? All they need to figure out is how to break her curse and give her back her human form.

“I know that, but—” Jungkook pauses. “Forget it.”

“What? Do you want us to get frisky in front of everyone?”

Jungkook deadpans Taehyung but his mouth twitches around the hint of a smile. “Would you?”

“No, but we could pretend.”

“Pretend is all we do.”

“With a couple things, yes.”

An emotionless veil drapes over Jungkook’s face, carefully crafted to hide what he may be feeling, but Taehyung is not blind to the upset he has elicited in him.

“Not that it’s any concern what you and I get up to in our married life. If—”

“People talk, Taehyung, whether we want it or not. Especially in high society, where rumors about others’ intimate life runs rampant to make up for the emptiness of their own. The moment the mindless gossip about how well or not I fulfill my duties to you turns into vitriol against us, the reputation of our marriage can be tarnished. The assets we bring to each other can be taken away from us. Because this… This isn’t even solely about that.”

“What else?”

“It’s about why my husband wouldn’t be pleased with me, why the Queen herself would cast doubt upon our marriage. Why, I, the heir to the throne, aren’t capable of doing something as mundane as

satisfying my husband's needs. It can make people wonder if you will remain faithful to me, if I will to you, if our union is worth investing into."

"That's—"

"While our pretense has been a lot more believable, it still remains that: a pretense. A fantasy for the prying eyes. A gossip for vultures to feed on. A *lie,* " Jungkook rasps. "Lies always come out, and I can't help but worry that Seohyung may have been seeing to it for tonight. So, no, Taehyung. This isn't simply about them seeing us 'get frisky'. It's about needing those people to believe in us. In our love, no matter how fictitious it is."

Taehyung does not expect the sudden hurt that wrenches at a place near his heart. "I…" He lifts a hand to his mouth as a silence stretches between them.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be snappy like that. M'feeling on edge all of a sudden. You'd think I wouldn't worry about her anymore, but knowing that I never know what she may be doing behind my back is—" Jungkook falls quiet when Taehyung shuffles to stand in front of him.

"Not everything was a pretense. Nothing is anymore," Taehyung says, but it sounds more like an uncertain question.

"It's fine, I—"

"This is not a pretense," Taehyung says as gently cradles Jungkook's nape to nudge the tip of his nose against the apple of the cheek. "This is not either," he continues and cups Jungkook's waist, nuzzling the shoulder, scenting the spot and grazing his lips there. "Kaiya was not a pretense either. Tearing the sky open for you was not too, right?"

Jungkook slumps against Taehyung, encircling his neck. "It wasn't."

"I know I haven't been the most, uh, honest with myself and you. Still working on that," Taehyung says as he straightens up and evades Jungkook's teasing smile, "but I meant it when I said we don't have to worry about the pretense, about whether or not people believe in us. They won't have any choice but to do so when they see us, don't you agree?"

The curve to Jungkook's lips is tender as he emits a soft sound. "You're right."

"When am I not."

"We'll still have to kiss."

"Again, that was a given." Taehyung even punctuates his words with a lightning peck on Jungkook's forehead. "You don't have to worry about anything, hm? I'll make sure that anything Seohyung may have said is discarded when those pompous dimwits see us, yeah?"

Jungkook nods with a chuckle and pecks Taehyung's cheek. "Okay. Thank you.. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Everything will be alright."

"Yes." Jungkook heavily exhales through his mouth. "Alright."

"Ready?"

Jungkook's fingers fasten around Taehyung's arm. "I'm ready."

The two of them begin to walk forward and soon enter the building.

They make their way through the citadel as Jungkook leads them through corridors then up the stairs. They climb to the last floor. Sounds of flutes, harps and other instruments can be heard ahead of them, mingling with those of chatter growing louder the more they approach the ballroom.

Taehyung halts them right before they turn and make their entrance, still hidden by the wall. "If anything happens, you tell me. If Seohyung wants to speak with you in private, you refuse and come get me. Understood?"

Jungkook peers at Taehyung with this palpable fondness. "Yes. Understood, Taehyung."

"Good." Taehyung rolls a shoulder. "Let's step inside the vultures' den."

Jungkook laughs as they both move past the wall and through the arch of the entrance.

They pause there, facing the rest of the room.

The ballroom has been decorated for the occasion, as Taehyung would expect.

The display is, as always, ostentatious and dripping with wealth, however even he can appreciate the beauty in the gold and beige tones that fill the area: through the elegantly hung curtains between columns here and there, but also through the gold ornaments curled around the top of the columns and enclosing the windows that stretch tall. The interior almost resembles a cathedral, a fresco painted on the high ceiling.

It isn't to Taehyung's tastes, but he has to admit it is quite pleasing to the eye, the decor more subtle than what he has seen before in the citadel.

What takes Taehyung by surprise is the display of arcane.

A podium is situated at the back of the room where an orchestra is installed, and there must be some kind of photokinesis arcane occurring because ribbons of sun-like glow weave around the musicians and high up to the ceiling, all produced by a warlock dressed in a way that reminds Taehyung of a harlequin.

Taehyung even recognizes a familiar face amidst the harp players, a certain Abeline whose breathed out, iridescent bubbles reflect the golden light of chandeliers and float high above the guests' heads.

Perhaps 200 or more people are present in the grandiose ballroom, all dressed more extravagantly than the other, like the lady wearing a gown that looks to be woven by stardust and midnight silk, luminous crystal peppering dress fabric. Some other guests are bearing a plethora of jewelry and gemstones, while others have crowns or tiaras propped on their heads.

While Taehyung isn't particularly nervous to be surrounded by humans, he still welcomes the presence of the few dragonborns tonight, their wings, tails and horns brought out, even recognizing some of them like the Prime Minister of Esanor that Vanae has traded with in the past.

The guests must have drawn eyes on each other, however not as much as Taehyung and Jungkook's arrival commands the attention.

The chatter quietens then stops.

A shush settles in the room, and every gazes converge toward the pair.

More specifically toward Jungkook where they remain fixated. Taehyung assumes that it's due to Jungkook's attire, a garment that must differ from anything the Prince of Amaris may have worn before.

Taehyung grasps Jungkook's hand. He removes it from where it's gripping his arm, and he lifts the fingers to his mouth and presses a kiss upon the knuckles, hyper aware of how their every motion will be scrutinized tonight. After dragging his palm down the golden spine to hug Jungkook's waist, Taehyung smiles at his flustered husband and says "Shall we?"

"Ah! There they are."

Jungkook tenses beneath Taehyung's fingers.

Seohyung smiles as she walks a path through the crowd that makes space for the light blue dress trailing behind her. "Everyone, welcome our most awaited guests that many of you have come to see: my son, Jeon Jungkook, and his husband, Kim Taehyung."

Seohyung marks her words with a clap. The guests echo it as applause elevates in the ballroom and they, somehow, manage to both sound *and* look posh, some tapping their handheld fans against their palms.

Seohyung crosses the distance, Sungmin rapidly stepping after her. She slowly lifts a hand toward Jungkook.

Taehyung is quick when he intercepts it.

He lightly bows forward as he brings her fingers to his forehead, trying his best to keep at bay the thought that flashes in his mind: of how easily breaking the bones would be if he desired to. "Queen of Amaris, it is an honor to meet you again," he says before straightening up as Seohyung retrieves her hand. "King of Amaris," he adds to Sungmin who nods back at him. He looks in better shape than the last time they have seen him.

"A pleasure to see you once more," Seohyung responds, her gaze frigid in spite of her ever present smile.

"A pleasure indeed," Sungmin says. "You were missed, Son."

Jungkook's sardonic, hummed chuckle is quiet enough to only be heard by the Queen and King. "Likewise, Father."

"Now that my son and his husband have arrived," Seohyung carries on and swivels to face the rest of the ballroom, "the gala shall begin."

The announcement is received with composed cheers, but also whistles from the easily excitable dragonborns who have no care for high society's etiquette, and who soon dance with some of the taken aback human guests.

Taehyung smiles to himself when he sees Jimin drag his partner for the night toward the center of the room as he begins to sway his hips with a disgruntled — yet smiling — Yoongi.

The orchestra begins to play a fast paced, jovial melody as the brouhaha resumes its former measure, albeit punctuated by whispers here and there from the guests whose gazes dart every few seconds toward Taehyung and Jungkook.

Taehyung grits his teeth at the judgment he can feel emanating from some of them. He tucks Jungkook closer to him, turning to the side to shield him from the scrutinizing vultures as best as he can.

“Now,” Seohyung resumes, voice low so no prying ears can spy on them, “I believe I have taught you well about proper attire for such receptions, haven’t I, Jungkook? And what are these…” She waves between Jungkook and Taehyung. “Designs. Yoongi’s work, I presume.”

Jungkook’s lips press into a thin line. He's about to answer, however Taehyung precedes him.

“Have you already forgotten about our last meeting?” Taehyung wonders, his gaze colliding with Seohyung’s.

“We are surrounded by many influential peers of mine, and yours too now, Taehyung. You do not wish to create a scene.”

“A word from Jungkook and your head will be his next wedding gift. My patience runs especially thin tonight, Seohyung.”

The curl to Seohyung’s tight lips turns cynical. She peers at Jungkook. “I hope your second outfit is more… Appropriate.”

Jungkook bursts into laughter, to Taehyung’s surprise. “Of course, my Queen.”

“Let us mingle, Sungmin. I do not wish to have them in my sight,” Seohyung says and swivels around.

“Of course, Dear.” Sungmin presents his arm to Seohyung who holds it, the two of them marching away.

Taehyung and Jungkook barely get the chance to walk a few steps inside the ballroom before they’re flanked by guests coming from all sides.

They all rush to greet and congratulate the wedded pair, flurries of puffy gowns, flowery hairstyles and reflecting jewelry blinding Taehyung in an array of colors. It’s overwhelming as the two of them have to shake hands after hands after *more* hands, but Taehyung tries his best to take it all with a stride and respond to any questions fired at him.

“A pleasure to finally meet you,” a boisterous Giray says who makes a complimenting remark about the tattoos, mentioning how he may commission Yoongi himself, thinking about starting a new kind of fashion trend.

“An honor to see you both tonight!” Another lady named Lili adds, a warlock who has worked with Yoongi in the past, Jungkook clarifies for Taehyung.

“Prince of Amaris,” Sohee is next.

“Hey,” Taehyung smiles.

Jungkook gasps and grins. “You’re here!” Jungkook hugs Sohee — within the limits of his intricate upper garment. Taehyung’s gaze trails on Jungkook’s naked back, fingers twitching when he spots the two dimples down low. “I was worried you may not join us tonight.”

“Well, I had pondered over it for quite a while, however, who am I to deny the Prince’s invitation and gift?” Sohee says with a sheepish chuckle, dressed in a tight fitting, iridescent dress lined with golden patterns. It's a tad sheer and quite provocative yet elegant, and if the way Jungkook pridefully peers at her, Taehyung has an inkling Jungkook may have been behind the choice of garment.

Jungkook echoes her amusement. “The dress looks wonderful on you, as I knew it would," he says and the two of them share a mischievous laugh together. "I’m happy to see you here. Truly.”

“Ah, please.” Sohee covers her face and pats her reddened cheeks before bowing. “So am I. Thank you for inviting me.”

“None of that,” Jungkook dismisses. "The reception is beautiful. You’ve done wonderful work as always.”

“You organized it?” Taehyung wonders.

“Yes!” Sohee nods. “It has been a lot of work, but a fulfilling one. Seeing it come to fruition, and now participating in it makes it all the more special.”

“You did great.”

“Thank you,” Sohee says with another bow at Taehyung this time. “Wait. I have something for you.” She hands Taehyung a small pouch.

Taehyung takes it. He laughs to himself after opening it. “Thanks for that again,” he says and flicks a chocolate chip in his mouth.

“I believe this will be much, *much* needed,” Sohee sighs.

“Please, I can’t stand her anymore already,” Jungkook whispers to Sohee. “She already made a remark about my outfit.”

“No remark from the wretched Queen would ever take away from the beauty of your garment and yourself, Jungkook, “ Sohee teases with a wink.

Jungkook lifts a hand to hide his smile. "Stop it.”

“There is something else I wanted to share with you,” Sohee quietly continues. “Seohyung has been quite absent from the Citadel, and leaving for prolonged travels. I’m not certain why, nor if she is planning some nefarious scheme, however I believe it wise to warn you.”

“Has she mentioned where she goes?”

“No, unfortunately.”

“Thank you for telling us.” Jungkook squeezes Sohee’s arm.

“I will continue to keep an eye on her, and tell you promptly if anything out of the ordinary happens,” Sohee assures with a determined nod of her head. “Do not fret.”

“Be careful."

“Don’t put yourself in reckless danger,” Jungkook adds. “I do enough of that on my own.”

Sohee and Jungkook both laugh together. “Of course.” She bows once more as Jungkook does the same. When she turns around, she bumps into a woman. She profusely apologies to her.

The woman grins at her and, after readjusting the strap of her navy blue, moonlight gown, she presents her hand to her.

“Oh, uh… I…”

“I am Hala," the woman introduces herself. "My eyes have laid upon you the moment you stepped into this ballroom. I would like to speak with you, if you agree, and perhaps share a drink together.”

“O—Oh. I… Of course. I would love that too,” Sohee smiles, her face red with a blush when she takes Hala's hand. Her head twists around to peer at Jungkook with widened eyes as she and Hala walk away.

“Kim Taehyung.”

Taehyung peers at the woman. A dragonborn, if the horns on her head are any hint, where flowery vines are coiled around, one curling down her arm. “Selene Targaryen. I’m happy yet surprised to see you here,” Taehyung greets the elusive woman.

“Words of Vanae and Amaris union have traveled far beyond the lands of Empyrean,” Selene smiles. “It is an unprecedented union between humans and dragonborns. I wanted to see it for myself, as it has inspired me.”

“Inspired you?” Taehyung and Jungkook echo together.

Selene lifts a hand above her head. The vines surrounding her arms stretch high up toward the ceiling where they spread in a blanket of white and yellow flowers, embellishing the current decor. “I am the daughter of a dragonborn father, and a human mother. A warlock, to be precise,” she explains and surveys Jungkook again. “My parents used to be mocked and vilified for their love"

"I'm sorry to hear this," Jungkook frowns.

"All is well now. After seeing you both, and being witness of the evident love between two races once foes now turned friends," Selene carries on with a pointed glance at the brushed swirl of blood on Jungkook's neck, "I believe it is time for the… order to change. For harmony to grow between humans, dragonborns and warlocks alike."

There’s a shine in Jungkook’s eyes. He holds Selene’s hand between his own, then says “I agree. *Wholeheartedly.* I believe heirs as you and I can help in comforting those changes, in ensuring peace between humankind and dragonkind.”

“I believe the same, dear Prince.” Selene bows at him then at Taehyung who promptly mirrors her.

“I hope to work with you in the future,” Taehyung smiles. "Perhaps join our Council, if you desire to."

“It would be an honor for the former, dear Leader, however I will ponder over your offer regarding the Council. I must admit I haven't been fond of this political entity."

"You and me both," Taehyung jests, eliciting a chuckle out of Selene.

"To a new era of communion,” Selene announces and raises her glass. “May you find joy in your path.”

It’s only once she’s gone that Taehyung whispers “Does she know about you?” Right as Jungkook says “Does she know about me?”

“I’m not certain?” Jungkook continues. “She seemed to, no?”

Taehyung surveys Selene. “Maybe.”

“Should we be careful about her?”

“Yeah, just in case, but I don’t think we have anything to worry about with her."

"She did seem honest, and she dislikes the Council, an additional token in my book," Jungkook nods and Taehyung huffs. "I'm surprised," he softly smiles. "I was hoping to, but I didn't think our marriage would have an impact like this."

"But it makes sense, doesn't it? It shows that forgiveness can be given, that the past doesn't define our future."

"Well, aren't you philosophical tonight."

"Must be the pompous air getting to my head."

Taehyung and Jungkook try to make their way toward the buffet to grab glasses for themselves, however another person halts them in their path, their crown glimmering under the light of the spherical sundial hanging from the center of the ceiling.

It goes on like this for a while, with the two of them mingling with the guests one after another.

Most of the discussion at first are mundane greetings and acquaintances muffled by the music playing at the back, however a few others turn out to be more interesting, like when two married ladies converse with Jungkook about some recent hot gossip that has been running through the high society corridors.

Taehyung comes to learn that said gossip appears to be the main attraction of those receptions.

He’s both nonplussed yet unwillingly entertained by it — a trait he has to blame Dahee for. He internally frowns when some couples mention the apparently nonexistent ‘bedroom intimacy’ of a famous King and Queen, now understanding Jungkook's earlier concerns. However he has to hide a snort behind a cough when a man mentions rumors of a duke who has apparently been having an affair with someone in a forbidden brothel in Eden. Taehyung can’t help but wonder if said man has met one of Hyuna’s angels there.

Jungkook is even more active in those discussions, emitting *'Ooh'* and *'Aah'* while subtly asking for more info that Jungkook must file somewhere at the back of his mind for some potential future uses, Taehyung is certain.

It's endearing, for some reasons, to watch Jungkook still retain his mischievousness even in this more proper environment.

"How has the wedded life been treating you?" A man asks, holding a glass of sparkling champagne.

"Wonderfully," Jungkook answers, pressed against Taehyung's side. "My husband is good to me. His people are too. Vanae has been a unique place to live in."

The old, rotund man nods. "Good to hear, good to head. I, myself, have decided to follow your example, and visit dragonborn lands for the first time. I must admit these people are a lot more human than history may have made them seem to be," he adds with a booming laugh. "They even speak our language!"

"They *are* humans," Jungkook interjects, voice steeled and laced with venom. "It would do you well to remember this, and treat them with the respect they are owed."

The old man looks delightfully castigated, eyes round and darting between Jungkook and Taehyung. "O—Of course. My apologies. I meant no harm."

"It's quite alright." Taehyung steps aside to let someone walk past him, their gown so exuberant two maids have to be holding its trail.

"I admire how upfront dragonborns are about their love for each other," the man vehemently nods. "You have quite the, uh… Peculiar, public and… And primal customs, from what I have seen. Which is understandable! Considering your draconic heritage. Fascinating, truly," he rapidly adds with a concerned look at Jungkook.

"Dragonborns deeply nurse the bond they share with their family, friends and lovers," Taehyung says. "We're romantics at heart. We pridefully show said love without shame, as there should be none."

"Of course, of course! Something humans should learn from, frankly," the man agrees. "I believe someone is calling my name. I will take my leave for now. A pleasure to have gotten the chance to speak with you both." He then bows so deeply that he nearly stumbles forward before catching himself and scurrying away.

Jungkook huffs.

"Viper."

"Don't."

"We're supposed to play it nice, aren't we?"

"I won't 'play nice' when some people speak of dragonborns as if they're nothing but mere animals," Jungkook quotes with so much sass that Taehyung can't repress the laughter that escapes him. "Stop laughing," Jungkook reprimands him through his own amusement.

Finally having a fleeting moment of peace in the night, Taehyung leads Jungkook toward one of the more secluded buffets where drinks, canapés and other appetizers occupy the wooden tables.

“It may not seem like it, but what he said is a good thing,” Taehyung carries on after kindly dismissing a maid offering to serve him and Jungkook a drink. He'd rather do it himself. “Could be better, but humans being more willing to mingle with dragonborns and vice versa is a sign that our marriage is conveying what it should, and that the peace can be maintained the more humans see us as humans too, rather than mindless beasts.”

“Well. You’re still partly a reptile,” Jungkook quips, earning himself a zap on the temple.

“Fuck off.” Taehyung clears his throat when a lady walking behind Jungkook stares at Taehyung with widened eyes. “Anyway,” he continues, ignoring Jungkook’s muffled hilarity. “Feeling alright?”

“Mhm. It’s been really fun,” Jungkook grins. “I love these receptions. There’s always plenty of interesting information shared.”

Jungkook continues to speak, but Taehyung does not listen.

The light of the candles on the table cast a golden glow on Jungkook, caught by his makeup and reflected in his eyes. The tint on his lips is a little glossy and more pink from the few times Jungkook has gnawed on his lower lip. Taehyung belatedly notices it, but there’s a faint, sheen layer of perhaps an oil or cream that glimmers on Jungkook's skin.

He's so gorgeous.

The contented — and prideful — realization that Jungkook is Taehyung’s husband, belongs *with* him, submerges Taehyung's mind with the thoughts he tends to ignore but has been struggling more and more to do so lately around Jungkook: those of his draconic heritage, like the fact that if he had his dragon tail out, he’s certain that it would be wagging behind him like some kind of disgustingly happy griffin.

Taehyung grumbles as his own thoughts as he serves Jungkook some kind of fruit punch after making sure there’s no alcohol in it. He munches on some of the chocolate chips and presents one to Jungkook who eats it from between Taehyung’s fingers.

“Say,” Taehyung begins.

“Hm?”

Taehyung holds Jungkook’s nape, kneading at the back of the ear. “I’m gonna mingle on my own for a bit, see if there’s any land Vanae could work with from what you’ve told me.” Jungkook had briefed Taehyung earlier on which city rulers Taehyung could strike profiting deals with, both for importation and exportation. “You’ll be fine by yourself in the meantime?”

“I’ll be with Yoongi and Jimin for a bit,” Jungkook says as the mentioned pair approaches them, “and I’ll mingle as well, don’t worry.”

“You do that.”

There is not an ounce of hesitation when Taehyung tilts Jungkook's head backward to dive in for a kiss, his lips closing around Jungkook's upper one.

Jungkook emits a small sound of surprise that he quietens around a sigh. His hands find their way around Taehyung's neck and when Taehyung leans back, Jungkook chases after him to trap one of Taehyung's lips with his own and resume the kiss.

Taehyung involuntarily shudders beneath Jungkook's fingers that play with the strands at the base of his nape, pulling on one and twirling another.

Someone clears their throat.

Taehyung breaks the kiss. His tongue darts over his lower lip to catch the remnant of gloss that has transferred from Jungkook, however Jungkook's face is still close, his lips too that Taehyung accidentally flicks his tongue upon.

Taehyung is about to apologize, which would be a *heretic* thing to do because this kind of kiss is expected and normal for *husbands* and, really, he shouldn't be as rattled by this because his tongue has previously been on Jungkook's *throat,* for Elder's sake, so—

"Youngsters lack decency nowadays, don't you think, Darling?" A lady tuts with arrogance as she smooths nonexistent ruffles off her gown. She fans herself, brows furrowed in a glower, hanging onto a man's arm.

Taehyung's nose twitches.

He turns Jungkook so the latter's back is pressed against the table's edge. His arm snakes behind to retrieve Jungkook's wine glass. "You have fun, hm?" Taehyung mouths against Jungkook's cheek, making it a point to do so on the side the lady can see.

Jungkook nods, a faint tremble in his fingers. "I will."

Taehyung waits for Jungkook's mouth to part around another word to lean in for another kiss, and when an expected noise of anger elevates on his right, he parts away again.

Taehyung bites back a smile as he watches the lady who glowers at him. He surveys Jungkook once more who looks dazed, yet still responds to the small peck Taehyung presses against his mouth again. "I'll be right back, yeah?"

"Making out in broad daylight in front of our esteemed elderly ladies that may not have many more days to live? What if it was the last thing you saw," Jimin says with faux sympathy to the lady who swivels around before sashaying away. Jimin snickers. "But truly, where has decorum gone?"

"Swallowed along with each other's tongues," Yoongi teases next.

Taehyung's face warms up. "Fuck off."

"Stop it," Jungkook hisses and pinches Yoongi.

Jimin barks out a laugh. His swaying tail slaps Yoongi's rear in a resounding smack. Yoongi's head twists so fast toward Jimin that Taehyung worries the warlock may have snapped his neck in the process. Jimin winks at Yoongi, doing nothing to abate Yoongi's blush.

“Kim Taehyung,” a lady begins. “I am Elvire Rei,” she introduces herself and shakes Taehyung’s hand. “May I borrow you for a moment? My wife and I would like to discuss with you for a moment.”

“Of course.” Taehyung flicks Jungkook’s forehead. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Have fun,” Jungkook mumbles and rubs his forehead.

Taehyung presents his arm to the lady who chuckles and holds onto it as she directs him to her wife.

The three begin to converse together.

Taehyung learns that they own an estate specializing in wine making. He isn’t personally interested in this, however he knows his people would enjoy sipping on more refined beverages.

So Taehyung discusses with the couple, pondering together about what kind of goods Taehyung could export for them in exchange as they drink from their glasses, plucking some appetizers here and there whenever a maid holding a tray of canapés expertly weaves through the guests.

Taehyung raves about his own land, speaking about its arcanic properties that prompts enchanted *‘Oh’* s from the ladies.

Soon enough, Taehyung finds himself surrounded by several dozens of people. Mainly humans. He handles it well nonetheless, even when the scents of potent perfumes overwhelm his nose. While a dash of apprehension does rear its head at some point, it’s chased away by a dragonborn who congratulates him with a strong pat on the shoulder.

The music changes once more to a lighter melody.

Taehyung isn’t fond of this one.

It’s too high, uncomfortably ringing between his ears.

He still manages to strike a few deals. He wants Vanae to expand in terms of influence and presence in human lands. He wants to bring more goods to his people, make their life easier with human’s medicinal science and their engineering advance that may have once been part of dragonborns’ downfall during the Great War, but could however be of use for them now centuries later.

It’s time to grow and forgive, after all.

“Have you perhaps caught a glimpse of Runalis’ rulers?” Taehyung wonders after some time over the sound of the joyful music. “I would like to speak with them as well.”

A lady grimaces. “While their land *is* prolific, I would suggest avoiding working with them. They are quick to demand more, and more and *more.* Their avidity is endless."

“Of course. I will be.”

“They’re by this column,” Elvire says and tips her glass toward it.

“Their daughter, Cyra, is a lot more amicable,” someone else says. “However I’m not certain of her presence here tonight.”

Taehyung stores the knowledge in his mind. “I’ll ask around and see for myself.”

“Good luck,” Elvire smiles.

Taehyung mirrors her with a bow.

The other lady chuckles in a perfect staccato of *‘Oh, oh, oh’*. “What a gentleman. It was wonderful exchanging with you, young man.”

“Likewise.”

Taehyung walks away before he can be roped into another conversation.

Finding Runalis’ rulers is fairly easy, and soon enough, he halts near them.

“If it isn’t half of tonight’s event,” King Juwon says with a subtle disdain. “Where is the other half?”

“Mingling, as I am,” Taehyung answers.

King Juwon scoffs as he snatches a glass from a servant’s tray.

“If I may be upfront with you,” Taehyung begins and then thanks the maid when he takes his glass, ignoring the flustered look on the guy’s face when Taehyung smiles at him, “I would like to inquire more about your lands, and discuss business with you. I’ve heard many good things about it.”

One of King Beomseok’s brows elegantly rises. “You have? From who?”

“Jungkook.”

“Well…” Juwon trails off. “That is not surprising,” he says and crosses an arm over his chest, lifting his glass to his lips with the other one. “Our *lands*,” he presses in a hiss, “have exceptional minerals and oil rigs, among plethora of other unique goods. Jungkook knows about these. Seohyung as well.”

After emitting a calculated scoff, Taehyung says “I’m here as Jungkook’s companion. Not Seohyung’s.”

Juwon and Beomseok peer at each other.

Their stances loosen some of their aloofness.

Juwon’s mouth opens around a horrifyingly endless tirade about how *‘fantastic’* and *‘truly one of a kind’* their *‘lands, plural’* are that Taehyung forces himself to smile and nod at. It wouldn’t be well perceived if he were to throw the obnoxious guy out the window.

Taehyung still listens to every word, as crucial knowledge is being shared.

It’s when Juwon deviates from materials goods to organic ones that Taehyung’s attention flashes back. “You export exotic fruits?”

“Yes. As well as other kinds, however all rare,” Beomseok nods. “They are highly coveted by our peers for their unique taste. Seohyung is especially fond of our durians.”

“We do trade a lot with her, both fortunate and unfortunate,” Juwon says.

Beomseok frowns. “Dear.”

Juwon glances at Taehyung and clears his throat. “Apologies, I do not—”

“It’s alright,” Taehyung laughs and brings his glass closer to his nose to serve as a barrier against the scent of lavender Juwon emits. “Unlike my husband for whom there is little I wouldn’t do…” He pretends to look around then leans forward, Beomseok and Juwon curiously doing the same. “I don’t carry the Queen close to my heart either,” he whispers, conspiratorial.

“Oh,” Juwon blurts out, half a whisper, half an exclamation. “Well… Us either. She’s quite wretched, isn’t she?”

“Mhm,” Taehyung vehemently agrees and holds his breath at Juwon’s fetid breath. “She’s difficult to stand, really. However I assure you, Jungkook is different.”

“Ah, yes. Yes, of course,” Juwon says. “Now that you mention it, being raised by this queen must have been a hassle. I had never pondered over this.”

“You don’t know the end of it,” Taehyung sighs. “Jungkook has never had a lot of choices in how he was allowed to behave, however he has been freer since he came home with me.”

Juwon hums with a nod. “We can see this, indeed. His garment has surprised us all. Very different and daring. I quite like the brush of scarlet paint on his neck. We may have misjudged him,” he says to Beomseok who also nods his head in agreement.

The two kings discuss together for a moment.

Another thing Taehyung learns tonight is that their dislike for Seohyung runs deep. *Festers,* he pensively muses.

Taehyung listens.

He remains mute as the two kings blabber about their wealth, seemingly not remembering said riches were stolen from dragonborns at some point considering that the specific gemstones they mention only grow on dragonborn arcanic soil. When Runalis’ kings seem to forget the race of the one before them, mentioning the Great War and how *‘wonderful’* it had been for their business and growth, Taehyung clenches his teeth together.

It’s clear, the way the kings view dragonborns as lesser beings the more Taehyung hears them. Taehyung can only imagine the amount of dragonborn blood this dynasty must have shed that they still clearly pride themselves upon. Perhaps forgiveness is not meant to be given to all.

Taehyung still smiles when their attention diverts on him again with excitement. He continues to converse with them for a moment, even managing to secure a potential trading deal when Taehyung mentions some arcanic plants.

It’s once they mention Eden in a whisper, and how they have brought home some goods from there, more specifically the ivory horns of an arcanic rare creature, that Taehyung chooses to make his

departure.

Taehyung trudges through the masses. His eyes slowly skim over the heads to try and spot a familiar one.

The ball is decadent around him, eons away from the very few dragonborn parties Taehyung may have joined. The latter would commonly be laid-back and boisterous in a familial atmosphere, while here the air is more forged and calculated. There's a conceit that emanates from most guests, each one certainly thinking themselves as more important than the person next to them.

Soon, the music becomes too loud.

A voice that booms in the room rings in Taehyung's head, trailed by a horrid laughter. He struggles more and more to focus on any fleeting chat-chat he's having, only throwing a few words here and there.

Taehyung wants to find Jungkook and spend the rest of the night with him.

Maybe he should take some fresh air. He's been here for nearly two hours by now. Taehyung is about to make a dash for the balcony when he catches sight of a golden hair stick.

He rushes toward it, and when his hands find the familiar, petite waist, his nose burying in the neck as he presses Jungkook's back against his chest, Taehyung feels like he can breathe anew.

"Hi," Jungkook greets after bidding goodbye to the two men he had been speaking with.

"Hey," Taehyung mumbles, breathing in and out Jungkook's scent that drowns the dozens of perfumes reeking in the ballroom.

"You're okay?"

Taehyung's lips purse when Jungkook turns around in his arms. "It's a lot. There's so much noise and putrid scents," he complains and drops his head on Jungkook's shoulder where he rubs his nose and stays. "When can we go home?"

Jungkook's shoulder shakes under Taehyung. "We still have the feast later on. So only in a few hours."

Taehyung heaves a long, drawn-out groan.

"I've been watching you mingle, you've been doing great. I can handle the rest and you can relax in the meantime." Jungkook pats Taehyung's back. "You even participated in some gossip. How unbecoming of you."

Taehyung lifts his head to deadpan Jungkook. "You're saying that as if one Saturday we didn't stay at a tavern simply to spy on this one couple that was having an argument."

"I can't blame us for wanting to know what the boyfriend may have done to warrant a plate of steaming soup on his head."

Taehyung chuckles. He can already feel his energy regenerate itself.

“I’m happy to see you try like this, Tae. I really am. Thank you,” Jungkook says with a gentle smile. “I meant what I said. You’ve been doing good, I’m proud of you.”

Taehyung is, once again, grateful to not have any dragon tails out. “I did say I want to leave a good impression.”

“You have. You *are.* You’ve charmed most of the guests tonight," Jungkook says. "A bit more, and they might like you more than me. Perhaps we’ll have to fight for who gets the crown, mh?”

“Good thing we’ll both have it.” Taehyung nestles with his nose the dried trail of the blood behind Jungkook’s ear. “Princes of Amaris, leaders of Vanae.” He can feel the gazes on them, and he reclines, ready to exchange another kiss with Jungkook for the prying eyes.

However a grating, obnoxious voice interrupts his momentum.

“Jeon Jungkook!”

Taehyung’s good mood sours faster than the plague erodes his arcane.

“Oh! Christian,” Jungkook greets with equal enthusiasm.

“Ian, please. Ian,” *Christian* corrects.

Jungkook, of course, laughs as he steps away from Taehyung to bow before Christian as the guy does the same with unnecessary theatrics.

Taehyung scrutinizes him.

He has to shove his hands in his trousers pockets to stop himself from launching the fool so high up in the sky Christian would become one more forgotten, worthless white dot up above.

Of course.

Of course the guy is dressed in a beige suit so similar to Taehyung’s that one would think they have bought their attire together. *Of course* his tattoos are also visible and, *of course,* he has a — albeit golden — thick necklace slung around his neck.

The thing does not even look good what's with that medium quality jaw line.

It’s *tacky,* unlike the jewelry Taehyung is wearing, carefully selected by Jungkook.

Taehyung wants to speak. Perhaps utter an unwarranted stingy remark, or maybe lie and say that he needs a moment alone with Jungkook. Which in retrospect would not be much of a lie.

“We—”

Taehyung does not get to finish.

“Young man!” An old lady says and drags Taehyung toward her with a lot more force than one would expect. “Come with! I believe your dragonborn brother, Jimin, has taken quite a liking to my land. We would like to discuss this with you as well."

“Ah, wait.”

“Our soil is riddled with all sorts of materials like gold," the lady loudly carries on, igniting Taehyung’s migraine. “I’ve come to learn Jimin wields a fire and metal breath? Fascinating!”

Taehyung wants to wrench his arm from her grasp and tell her to shut. *Up.* But he has to play nice and be a good leader rather than a childish husband, and so he says “He does all sorts of metal related commissions.”

“Yes, yes! I’m interested.”

Taehyung begrudgingly trails after the lady.

“I would like for Vanae and my city to work together promptly! Our smiths have been having a difficult time lately, but I hear your brother is quite exceptional. I want to commission him. A lot! We have some pocket money to spend, about a million coins. In the future, if we work well together, we of course intend to invest more. We trade with many countries. We could whisper in willing ears about your wonderful smith.”

Taehyung meets Jimin’s gaze, and he’s not blind to the cry for help he reads in it.

So Taehyung stays and goes “Please, tell me more.”

Taehyung tries his best to focus on the subject at hand: save Jimin from the kind but overly enthusiastic lady.

He succeeds in doing so for the first few minutes. They even managed to settle on an arrangement with a starter commission for the price of 200 000 coins, so as to not overwhelm Jimin with too much work at once.

However, Taehyung's attention is fleeting.

It’s partially due to the nauseating vanilla scent that emanates from the lady whenever she waves her handheld fan in Taehyung’s direction or readjust the diamond encrusted tiara on her head. Taehyung feels a little sick from it. He’s not used to being surrounded by so many strong and varying perfumes.

He fantasizes about being back home in Vanae, in his and Jungkook’s house that always smells so *heavenly.* He imagines himself sprawled on the couch, Jungkook next to him rambling about Elder knows what. He imagines his nose buried in the inviting neck, breathing in the grim floral scent and falling asleep to it.

Taehyung internally sighs.

His gaze flits away from the lady.

He’s halfway through a sip of his drink when he stills.

Jungkook is still speaking with Christian, even after perhaps 20 minutes have passed since Taehyung has left them on their own.

It’s not surprising as much as it is annoying.

For the next few minutes that pass where the lady and Jimin’s chatter becomes a background noise, Christian remains stuck to Jungkook’s side, the latter two settled near a buffet table and munching

together on some appetizers.

Jungkook even grabs a canapé Christian presents to him.

Taehyung guesses Christian has the decency to not hand feed a married husband, at least. Not that it aids in abating the growing ire within Taehyung.

Jungkook laughs a lot once more.

Taehyung likes to think it's nothing but a polite reaction, *manners* that Jungkook gracefully grants Christian, but Taehyung knows better. The guy genuinely amuses Jungkook.

Is that a blush on Jungkook's cheeks?

Must be a trick of light. Or if it truly is a blush, it has to be due to the glass of champagne Jungkook has been sipping on.

But that champagne is non-alcoholic, a treacherous voice nags in Taehyung's mind.

Not that it matters. It wouldn't make sense anyway for Jungkook to be flustered by an idiot who had worn a summer shirt during a thunderstorm.

Although Taehyung has to admit that said idiot is handsome.

Fits Jungkook's tastes to the T, right? He even resembles Taehyung in some ways, and the thought is even more infuriating than any other nonsensical bullshit Taehyung's mind may have conjured for the past minutes.

Christian leans closer to Jungkook's ear. He whispers something there that must elicit a laugh, or worse, a *giggle* out of Jungkook who covers his smile with a hand. Taehyung strains his ears to listen, but the ambient brouhaha and music drowns everything else.

Christian must make a remark about Jungkook's outfit because the latter grins as he steps away from the idiot and touches the armature of his garment. Jungkook must be raving about it. His lisps might even be cutely prominent, as it tends to be when he excitedly rambles about something.

Taehyung clicks his tongue.

Jungkook turns around, most likely to show the spine jewelry, however he's blissfully unaware of the way Christian's gaze trails down his back.

Taehyung, on the other hand, notices.

Sounds of glass shattering erupt nearby.

"Oh my!" The lady gasps.

Taehyung peers at his own hand.

Sure enough, the wine goblet he had been holding is gone, a mess of shattered glass scattered on the ground, some sticking to his palm.

"Dear, are you well? And what was that noise I heard?"

Taehyung's gaze snaps on the lady's concerned one. "Hm?"

"He is. He doesn't seem to have cut his hand," Jimin interjects after checking up on Taehyung. "And the rumble was his stomach."

"Oh! Quite rambunctious," the lady laughs. "I am famished as well. I understand."

"Dragonborn have a huge appetite," Jimin says and joins the hilarity as he pats Taehyung's shoulder.

"You! Kind sir, please!" The lady gestures at a servant who rushes toward her. "My friend here has accidentally broken his glass. I'm afraid some of us may be injured if we do not clean this mess."

"I will handle it promptly," the servant bows and scurries away.

"I will be speaking with you again later," the lady continues after Juwon has called out her name. "I'm afraid Runalis' kings have taken interest in me. Quite the predicament, if you ask me. No one can stand them." She emits a mischievous laugh when Jimin utters a *'Likewise'* punctuated by a wink. She sashays away in a twirl, nearly smacking Jimin across the face with her long, jeweled braid.

"So."

Taehyung grits his teeth together as he crouches to pick up the broken pieces of glass, ignoring the servant's protests who promptly aids him.

"What's going on?" Jimin continues.

"Nothing," Taehyung answers and rises up once done with his task with Jimin's help. He walks to the opposite of where Jungkook is to fetch a new glass.

"Right. Must be why you're brooding in your corner right now?"

"I'm not in the mood for teasing," Taehyung snips, his glare darting on Jimin.

"I'm not teasing you. Talk to me."

Taehyung debates for a moment before saying "Christian is with Jungkook."

"And?"

"*And*, he's being— He's…" Taehyung swallows down the staccato that feebly rumbles in his chest. "Doesn't matter," he says, half to dismiss the conversation, half to convince himself. "Jungkook is having fun, it's—"

"Tae, has the conversation gone well? You were away for a while."

Taehyung swivels around at Jungkook's voice. He scans the ballroom but can't find Christian anymore. "Yeah, it did."

"Ooh. Struck a nice deal?" Jungkook wonders, placing a hand on Taehyung's lower back.

"Yup."

Jungkook's gaze drifts between Taehyung and Jimin. "Everything okay?"

Taehyung stomps down his irritation to smile at Jungkook. "Yes. Having fun?"

Jungkook nods with a grin as Yoongi joins the trio as well.

Yoongi looks exhausted. Taehyung relates to the sentiment.

"There's going to be a communal dance," Jungkook announces as the guests all begin to move away from the center of the ballroom to crowd the buffet and walls. "Would you like to join me?"

Taehyung perks up at this. He finds Yoongi's gaze who quirks a brow at him. "Which dance will it be?"

"The Promenade," Jungkook answers and mentions what the next two dances will be as well.

None that ring any bell in Taehyung's mind.

Taehyung's mouth opens then closes.

"Oh."

Oh.

All of a sudden, the ire turns into a sour, bereaved creature.

"I don't know this dance," Taehyung says with a small chuckle. "I'll look ridiculous."

"It's fi—"

"You can dance it yourself. It's a communal one, right? You won't be alone."

Jungkook stares at Taehyung. His disappointment is evident, and Taehyung nearly backtracks on his decision, but the last thing Taehyung wants is to humiliate Jungkook.

"Right." Jungkook's smile does not quite reach his eyes. "I'll get ready." He pecks Taehyung, something brief and discarded moments later when he turns around to join the growing group of guests arranging themselves for the upcoming dance.

"Hey, Taehyung," Jimin begins, "maybe you should go da—"

Taehyung yanks his arm from Jimin's grasp as he strides through the ballroom and squeezes his way past the crowd of spectators.

He slides the balcony door open before closing it behind him.

He hunches over the balcony's railing, head hung low.

"Fuck."

Taehyung feels childish. *Is* childish, really. But if he's honest with himself, he's upset, more than he had imagined himself to be.

Taehyung had crafted a plan for tonight.

It had started when he had visited Yoongi and asked him about the type of dances that may happen in the ball. It had continued with Taehyung secretly studying the book Yoongi had then given him, where sketches of the different steps of a waltz were drawn. Taehyung had spent an entire night and early morning learning them, and had even requested his father's help in briefly practicing them to avoid any mishaps when the time would come.

Taehyung does not *dance.*

Hell, he hadn't even known what a waltz is until he had opened that damned book.

This was the plan. Mingle. Play it nice. Be proper. *Polite.* Do well and make Jungkook and his parents proud who had decided to let Taehyung handle this. The last step was to ask Jungkook for a dance. All for nothing because the one single waltz Taehyung has learned won't be the one to happen tonight.

Taehyung's head turns to survey the ballroom.

The tune of the music changes to a more classical and sharper melody. It echoes the way the guests begin to dance with one another, changing partners every few steps.

Jungkook is with a lady, the two of them smiling as he twirls her around before sliding away from her to someone else. Taehyung should see it coming when Christian eventually ends up being with Jungkook, yet the anger simmers alive nonetheless.

He averts his gaze from the scene.

He summons lightning on his fingers, peering at their light. He hisses when one of the bolts lightly singes his fingertip.

The balcony's door opens then closes.

"You're alright?"

"I'm peachy. Happy. Elated, even."

Yoongi sighs. "That was a stupid question."

No shit. "I'm not the one giving Jungkook his dance now am I?"

"You would be if you hadn't refused."

"Of course I'd refuse. Learned that waltz for nothing. You know what else I did? I even went to a tavern and asked a bard to play the music sheet of that dance so that I know how it is."

"I'm sorry." Yoongi halts next to Taehyung, propping his arms on the railing. "The dance in the book I gave you usually always happens, but considering the scale of this reception, it must have not been possible. We're lacking space."

"Whatever."

"You can still go dance with him."

"And embarrass him in front of two hundred pompous, gossiping jackasses? I'll pass."

“Jungkook won’t care about that.”

“I do.”

“He’d be happy with any dance you’d have with him.”

Taehyung knows that is true, but still.

“S’fine.”

“It clearly isn’t.”

“And what am I supposed to do about it? I am *not* joining a dance I don’t know. He’s already having his own anyway."

“Considering that you’re the second most important guest of the night, you’d be more than in your right to request the orchestra to perform another song.”

Taehyung's gaze snaps away from the dark garden to settle on Yoongi. “Would that be possible?”

“Technically, no. It wouldn’t be allowed, as it would go against Seohyung’s decision who personally selects which dance will be performed at her receptions. However, I don’t believe you care about such etiquettes.”

“Fuck.” Taehyung glances over his shoulder at the ballroom before peering ahead again. "Are you sure it's fine to ask?"

"You can try."

“Alright.” Taehyung nods, hope rising. "Thanks.”

“If they don’t agree, you should still dance with him, Taehyung. You’re both evidently upset that you aren’t, which is worse than being embarrassed. Make the dance happen either way.”

Taehyung drags a palm down his face, regretting his impulsiveness again. “Yeah, I… Yeah. I fucked up.”

“Yup. Now make up for it.”

Taehyung bobs his head in agreement. He silently surveys Yoongi then says “You’re gonna join?”

Yoongi winces. “Dancing isn’t a form of art I enjoy.”

“Jimin would be happy with any dance you’d have with him.”

Yoongi splutters. “Fuck off.”

Taehyung snickers to himself, feeling lighter now that Yoongi has presented a solution more reasonable than brooding in one’s corner about one’s terrible decision. “It’s true.”

Yoongi hums. “I’ll think about it.”

“Is it serious between the two of you?”

“Uhm…” Yoongi clears his throat, ears red. “Yeah, kinda. We’re taking it slow, but since Kaiya, we… We’ve been going on little dates here and there. S’been nice.”

“Good. Don’t hurt him.”

“I don’t intend to.”

A comfortable silence lulls between them as Taehyung waits for the current dance to be complete. The music stops at some point, and a round of applause echoes behind him.

“You know Jungkook isn’t interested in Ian like that, right?”

“Elders, shut up.” Taehyung turns his head away from Yoongi. “I feel childish enough about this.”

Yoongi laughs. “Nothing will happen between them, dumbass.”

“I know that.”

Or does he?

What does *Yoongi* know about this anyway? Jungkook appears to really enjoy Christian’s company.

“If you want to talk to the orchestra, it’s now while there’s a break,” Yoongi announces.

Taehyung does not need to be told twice. He straightens up and downs his glass that he leaves on the stone railing. “Elders. I’m gonna dance in front of dozens of people. *Elders*… ” He groans. “It’s fine. I learned. And I’m fucking great at that waltz.”

“You won’t dance at all if you don’t hurry.”

Taehyung curses as he rushes out of the balcony to enter the ballroom again.

He ignores anyone trying to start a chat with him as he makes a beeline to the podium where the orchestra is settled. “Hey,” he calls out, the musicians all peering at him. “Who’s the, uh, leader of the orchestra?”

“Conductor,” a man smiles around his mustache. “How may I help you?”

“I have a request.”

“Of course.”

“Can you play this music?” Taehyung retrieves from the inner pocket of his vest the music sheet of the waltz.

“Unfortunately, the Queen has removed this dance from this reception’s lis—”

“I’ll pay you,” Taehyung cuts off. “However much you want. Thirty thousand coins. More. Does not matter. I need you to play this. Right now.”

The conductor steps away for a moment to converse with the rest of his musicians as Taehyung anxiously waits.

When the man comes back, it's with a smile. "We would like for you to sign cheques for us, attesting you will pay each musician 30 000 coins, and 50 000 coins to the conductor," he says and places a hand over his own chest.

Taehyung isn't looking forward to the dent this will carve in his funds at home, however he rapidly signs the dozen or so of cheques handed to him.

"The money will be sent to you as soon as possible. Do you accept payments as gems?"

The conductor peers at his musicians who all enthusiastically nod. "Of course!"

"Alright. I might send you gemstones instead, if it works with you. They will resell for more than the coins I can give you," Taehyung says, willing to mine for them or even pluck the gems from those he has hoarded.

"Wonderful!"

"If the Queen tells you to stop performing, send her to me," Taehyung carries on. "I'll deal with her myself."

The conductor laughs. "I quite like your boldness, young man. Shall we begin the song now?"

"Yes, please."

"Understood." The old man walks toward his musician, facing the orchestra. "Taffy! Dear!" He claps twice. "Put your flute aside and be prepared at the piano! There is a change of plan!"

Taehyung turns.

He scans the ballroom.

Confusion runs through it, the guests glancing at each other as they wait for the next song that never comes.

Taehyung draws out a tense sigh.

He begins to march forward. His throat is parched. His heart palpitates the more he reduces the distance between himself and Jungkook. However Taehyung drives some assurance from the way Christian draws a new chuckle out of Jungkook.

"I don't think this was planned?" Jungkook says to Christian. "Is there a problem? I wonder why the next song is not playing."

"If the Queen's glower is any indication," Christian begins, "something is amiss. Maybe a new song is being prepared?"

"Perhaps," Jungkook muses.

"If that's the case…" Christian leans over Jungkook's wrist that he holds. "Would you do me the honor of—"

Taehyung flicks Christian's fingers away from Jungkook's hand, and reclaims it as his own.

Taehyung does not grant as much as a glance to Christian. His gaze remains riveted on Jungkook, the only who matters. Taehyung bows before his husband, speaking his next words against the storm swathing the wedding ring.

“May I have this dance, Gem?”

Jungkook sharply inhales. His next exhalation is slow, eyes brimming with relief. “Yes,” he answers, ever so softly. “I would love that.”

Jungkook’s gaze does not stray away from Taehyung when the latter straightens up. It still remains on him when Taehyung lets go of Jungkook to bend a knee and bow, a gesture that Jungkook mirrors with a happy sound.

The pulsations of Taehyung’s heart speed up as he places a palm on Jungkook’s spine, the jewelry warm. He holds Jungkook with trembling fingers, afraid to disappoint.

Every guests’ attention is on Taehyung and Jungkook.

The world is still around them.

Then, as if on cue, the first note of the violins echoes through the room, and the two of them take their first step together.

Taehyung’s palm is clammy where it’s clasped against Jungkook’s as their arms glide through the air, swiveling in tune with each other. Jungkook’s gaze is something bright and open, a precious jewel whose surprise remains feeble compared to the adoration he regards Taehyung with.

Taehyung feels unworthy of such reverence, but he gorges onto it anyway, too selfish to care, too taken by Jungkook to want to part away, too spellbound by the chuckle Jungkook emits when Taehyung twirls him before Jungkook does the same with Taehyung.

The notes of the cellos curl around them, the piano gently singing alone as their waltz carries them across the marble floor.

The steps are clear in Taehyung’s mind.

They let go to circle one another for a moment before finding each other anew, as though trying to pull away, yet drawn back by an invisible ribbon, unable to remain far for too long.

“You’ve learned this dance,” Jungkook whispers, as if wishing to be heard by Taehyung only.

“I have,” Taehyung answers, just as quietly. “I wanted to surprise you.”

Jungkook’s head tilts to the side with a smile as they pivot on their spot once more. The light of the chandeliers pepper his skin in an airy sheen, reflected by the golden freckles that speckle his eyes.

“Surprised does not come close to how I feel.”

Taehyung hums, lips curving. “And how do you feel, Gem?”

“Elated. Dazed.” Jungkook twirls at a next step, finding himself in Taehyung’s arms moments later. “ *Enraptured,* ” Jungkook rasps in a murmur that tingles on Taehyung’s lips, so very near.

Taehyung distantly hears rustles of fabric as guests begin to join the dance.

However soon, in an imaginary, dark veil that drapes over the ballroom, the rest of the world disappears, and Taehyung's attention attaches to the one before him.

All that remains is Jungkook.

Jungkook's molten eyes that never dare to look away from Taehyung's, fervent and devoted.

Jungkook's scent; this bouquet of sweet death, flowers and pomegranate that entwines Taehyung's senses.

Jungkook's fingers that ever so tenderly caress Taehyung's neck, raising pebbles in their path.

Taehyung's mouth parts open around a shaky sigh.

A cottony, delicate plummet swathes him. He wonders if the floor is collapsing below him, or if his heart has escaped him to find a home in Jungkook. Perhaps he and Jungkook are flying, as they do so across the ballroom floor, the soft clicks of their heels echoing their movements.

There's something in the way Jungkook dances: in the assurance that he exudes, in how he guides Taehyung through a step as much as Taehyung guides him through another, in how he is so evidently swimming in his element.

It's different, to be a witness of this side of his husband.

Taehyung feels as though he's meeting Jungkook for the time again, this Prince of Amaris who commands the attention and allegiance of all.

Taehyung has thought to have known happiness with him, but it does not compare to the docile yet growing euphoria that thrills through his veins, thrums across his skin as two of them continue to waltz with one another, their arms flowing away from each other before curling around one another.

Their faces drift closer, enough for Taehyung to feel Jungkook breathing upon his lips.

The points of contact are few: a hand on a shoulder, another on a waist, the other two entangled together. A distance is kept, as per this waltz's requirements, yet dancing with Jungkook feels more intimate than anything they may have done before.

It's their gazes that have nowhere else to settle aside from each other, wrapping the two in this bubble of them and only *them.* It's the breathless chuckle Taehyung emits when Jungkook hums a soft sound of delight. It's this bliss to feel Jungkook's body so very near to Taehyung's, warm and supple, yet sturdy and secure

It's also how Taehyung cradles Jungkook's waist to lift him in the air, twirl both of them in a circle; how their breaths mingle when he lowers Jungkook, their noses bumping together, a strand of Jungkook's hair tickling Taehyung's cheek.

The orchestra itself vanishes from Taehyung's mind.

He and Jungkook now dance to their own intimate melody, privy to themselves only.

The plummet descends further within Taehyung's chest, coalescing with this incessant itch. Taehyung wonders if he's falling or flying. Perhaps both, as he feels as though he and Jungkook are dancing amidst nebulous clouds, free together.

The sight Jungkook makes eclipses any scenery Taehyung may have seen high above, so unbelievably breathtaking that Taehyung has to remind to breathe every few seconds.

He whirls away from Jungkook, chased after moments later, only for them to reverse the step as Taehyung is the one to slide his foot toward an elegantly spinning Jungkook.

Jungkook's grasp is lax on Taehyung's shoulder when they fall in each other's embrace anew, a trail of goosebumps running down his spine when Taehyung cups his lower back. "Thank you for offering me this dance, Kim Taehyung… I was not aware you were privy to such customs."

"A recently acquired skill," Taehyung says, the two of them continuing their waltz. "A present for you"

"I'm charmed to be the recipient of such a precious gift."

Jungkook tucks a strand of hair behind Taehyung's ear, and a pleasant ribbon of shiver envelops Taehyung.

"I wouldn't dare give it to anyone else."

"Aren't I lucky?" Jungkook grazes the tip of his nose along the curve of Taehyung's cheek, halting at the ear where he speaks his next words. "Being fed such a rare, cherished fare."

"Who else would it belong to, if not you? Ambrosia must only be given to the gods, should it not?"

When Jungkook reclines, a rosy tint colors his cheeks. His smile is ever growing as he steps back to gracefully whirl one way then another around Taehyung, his arms delicately curling in his path. His eyes are closed, contentment and bliss painting his face, and he dips forward before pivoting in a flurry of silky silver trail. He catches Taehyung's hand in-between two steps, the raven curls of his hair oscillating behind him.

Jungkook looks utterly *mesmerizing.*

The buzz within Taehyung's chest heightens when Jungkook's eyes open again to find Taehyung's. He crosses the thin distance between them.

There's a tension in Taehyung, intimate and flustered.

He's not certain why he does so, and he does not mean to, but he averts his eyes for a fleeting moment when his heart skips a beat at the closeness and sight Jungkook creates. His throat clicks when he swallows. His body heats up ever so slightly, finding it more and more difficult to hold Jungkook's gaze.

However there is nowhere nor anyone else Taehyung wants to look at, and so he gazes back at Jungkook, hoping the incessant tremble in his hand can't be felt.

Everything is exacerbated.

Definite.

They have uttered their wedding vows months ago, yet this dance feels like the most tangible token of affection and faithfulness than any wedding ceremony or ring could ever be.

Their melody quietens.

Their steps slow down, then come to a halt.

They both still as one.

Taehyung is breathless as he stares at Jungkook.

Taehyung startles when the resounding sound of applause roars in the ballroom. It's reflexive when he mirrors the bow Jungkook draws before him, his mind and body hazy.

"The next dance will begin shortly," Seohyung announces. "Apologies for the sudden change."

The guests shuffle behind Jungkook, some drinking from the buffet and fanning themselves, others looking for a new partner to dance with. Their chatter is muffled in Taehyung's ears.

"Thank you for the dance," Jungkook says, close to Taehyung again, and he punctuates his words with a kiss at the corner of Taehyung's mouth. "It was enchanting."

"I… Uh. Yeah." Taehyung's face is warm, and this time he has no qualms in averting his gaze. Looking at Jungkook is too much. "You're welcome. Thank you too."

Jungkook chuckles. "Are you alright?"

"I'm good. M'good." Taehyung drums his fingers on Jungkook's back, heart wildly beating through his veins.

Their waltz replays in his mind in an endless music note.

"Actually, if we offer each other's gift now…" Jungkook trails off to hold onto Taehyung's waist. "I have one for you too."

"Uh?" Taehyung glances around when someone bumps against him. "A gift?"

"Mhm. Would you like to see it?"

Taehyung stupidly nods, the only answer his muddled mind can conjure.

Jungkook retrieves the hair stick from the bun that falls apart into curtains of wavy strands framing his face.

The end of the stick is unexpectedly pointy and sharp, and Taehyung realizes this when Jungkook drags it at the side of Taehyung's neck, nipping through the skin.

Taehyung's thoughts are still numbed down, his body buzzing with incessant tingles, and so he confusedly observes the way Jungkook brings the end of the hair stick to his mouth. There are patterns on the golden wand. Runes, to be more precise.

Taehyung sharply inhales when Jungkook smears the bead of blood across his own lips.

Jungkook's lidded gaze is cast down, but it snaps up on Taehyung's seconds later. When he speaks again, the words are lowly rasped, an alluring incantation that coils up to Taehyung's ears.

"*Sanguis ornare.*"

Something odd happens then.

One of the rubies encrusted in Jungkook's necklace breaks apart. Falling from its midst is a red, liquid substance. A second ruby shatters. Then a third, fourth, more.

Gasps and rapid chatter erupt around Taehyung.

The entire necklace is gone moments later, replaced by scarlet rivulets that glide along Jungkook's naked shoulders and arms, trickling past the collarbones, akin to the once ruby earrings now melted into reddened trails.

Soon, Jungkook is draped in the odd water.

It takes a while for Taehyung to realize the rubies weren't gemstones as much as they were glass vials. The deep red water touches the bone-like garment. Its fabric seemingly absorbs the liquid that spreads lower and lower, white consumed by carmine.

Jungkook's garment *moves.*

The bone-like armature unfurls, akin to the petals of a flower opening after finally being fed its awaited sustenance. It stretches across Jungkook's form in a dress, hugging his arm and neck, his leg and waist, while remaining open at the center of the chest.

Then, there's the smell that finally catches up to Taehyung's nose.

Sweet and watery.

Metallic.

"You once mentioned how you wanted to see me bathe in your blood," Jungkook quietly says, his gaze heated by the new shadow of red coloring his lids, lips tainted in scarlet. "I thought I would fulfill your wish at last."

Taehyung had wondered what Jungkook may have been planning with his odd request Friday, but the question had left his mind the very next day.

Jungkook stands swathed in blood, and Taehyung forgets to breathe.

The curve to Jungkook's lips is gentle yet sharp when he brushes the remnant of blood across his upper lip.

"Do you like my gift?"

The pull in Taehyung's eyes is painful. A roar resonates between his ears, or perhaps it is his heart that appears to want to break out of his chest. His thoughts are reduced to one sole sentence.

Jungkook is wearing Taehyung's blood.

Jungkook is wearing *his* blood.

Jungkook is wearing his blood, Jungkook is wearing his blood, Jungkook is—

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung staggers forward, gaze riveted where he had left the scarlet trace before the ball.

Jungkook draws the start of a motion. A staccato rumbles in Taehyung’s chest. Jungkook ignores the warning and steps backward. Taehyung’s gaze finds Jungkook’s challenging one. He stalks ahead. His eyes dart to the side, mapping out the different paths Jungkook can take to escape.

Try to, if Jungkook dares.

Taehyung peers at his left palm.

His teeth come down in it, tearing through the flesh. Half to fruitlessly try to fulfill the need to do so on Jungkook, half to see another wish come to fruition. When he pulls away from his hand, drops of blood fall from his mouth and between his teeth, more coating his palm.

No pain registers in his head.

Jungkook startles when Taehyung’s gaze snaps back on him. He tries to move to the left but Taehyung follows the motion as he approaches him. Jungkook attempts to find another escape route on the right, never turning his back. Taehyung blocks it with a controlled bead of force that whistles past Jungkook’s cheek and nips at the skin before sinking into the column behind.

Jungkook’s eyes are wide and wild, mouth parted around his rapid breathing, but there’s a twitch to his lips, this thrill of pure *excitement* that pulsates out of him and echoes with Taehyung’s.

An aborted gasp tumbles out of Jungkook’s mouth when his back collides with the column. *Captured.*

Contentment rumbles within Taehyung.

It amplifies when his bloodied palm presses over Jungkook’s throat and coils around it. Jungkook tries to resist, to pull himself free with a jerk of his head, but when Taehyung roughly thrusts him back against the column, Jungkook surrenders with a shaky sigh, his balled up hands slipping behind him.

Taehyung’s fingers tighten, demanding his due. He receives it moments later, given when Jungkook slackens in Taehyung’s grip and tips his head back. Taehyung’s hummed approval is hoarse and drawn-out, answered with a chuckle from Jungkook. His palm strokes down Jungkook’s throat, watching with exhilaration the way it leaves a bloody imprint in its wake. He leans forward, brushing his nose at the back of Jungkook’s ear.

A click of heel.

Rancid scent.

“Leave them be,” Jimin hisses at Christian whose gaze darts between Taehyung and Jungkook.

“He’s hurting him! Why aren’t you—”

“He is *not.* So unless you want to know what a broken spine feels like because you challenged a fucking dragonborn and his mate,” Jimin continues, “ *move,* and don’t concern yourself with what isn’t yours.”

Too many eyes, Taehyung bristles.

His palm drifts to clamp Jungkook’s nape. He pulls Jungkook away from the column to push him forward and lead them toward the balcony.

The crowd splits in their path.

Taehyung catches the few dragonborns keeping their gazes low and away from Jungkook.

It’s only once in the partial privacy of the balcony, the door closed, that Jungkook frees himself from Taehyung’s grasp to turn around. “Taehyung, are y—” Jungkook falls mute when Taehyung presses him against the railing.

The scent of his own blood clothing Jungkook is intoxicating, stripping Taehyung’s mind from any sense of restraint.

A newfound desire swells within him, something raw and untamed.

A craving to kill and hunt and *devour.*

If the way Jungkook pants as he stares at Taehyung, pupil blown out and body heating up more and more, a similar appetite grows in him. The muscles of his throat tense then relax. The veins there pulsate, and Taehyung swears that he can distantly hear the beating heart pumping blood through them, inviting.

Taehyung might devour Jungkook right then and there. *Needs to,* a voice rasps in his mind and overtakes his thoughts.

Jungkook calls out Taehyung’s name.

Not a hair’s breadth exists between them when Taehyung presses his body flush against Jungkook’s, dictating on who each and every single sense of Jungkook should be aimed on. Taehyung grabs a handful of Jungkook’s strands. He’s not gentle with it. He does not think he’s capable of that right now. He tilts the head to the side, reveling in the hiss Jungkook emits and in the fingers that grip onto the collar of Taehyung’s vest.

Prickly lightning courses across Taehyung's fingers where they tug aside the collar of Jungkook’s dress. Wind seeps from his parted mouth in heavy gusts that whistle around them. His mouth touches the skin there, fangs grazing next.

His teeth hurt.

So much.

Only one thing could alleviate the pain. And so Taehyung waits, and waits, and—

The permission comes in the shape of a breathless *‘Yes’.*

Nails sink into Taehyung’s nape when his teeth pierce through the flesh of Jungkook’s neck. Jungkook quivers, a full body, winded thing that shakes through Taehyung’s core. Jungkook’s blood suffuses Taehyung’s mouth. The nectar spreads across his tongue and slides down his throat but it's not enough.

“ *Please,* ” Jungkook breathes out.

Taehyung understands the mute demand.

The ache lessens when his clamp tightens. He bites harder and *harder* and a fleeting, distant worry flickers in Taehyung's mind, about how he might tear a piece of Jungkook if he doesn’t let go, but the thought of it is so alluring that it sends tendrils of warm pleasure through his very cells.

The grip of his teeth worsens, the one of his hand in Jungkook’s hair does too.

“Hah… Fuck.” Jungkook grasps onto Taehyung’s hair that he pulls on. “Tae, wait. There's… Something's weird.”

Taehyung ignores the plea, relishing in the taste of Jungkook’s blood, drawing more of it when his teeth bore deeper in the flesh.

“*Taehyung.*”

He's the one to hiss when his head is pulled away by a hard yank.

Jungkook’s eyes are misty and lidded. They dart low on Taehyung’s face as he cups his cheek. His thumb grazes over Taehyung's upper lips, smearing the warm blood. It passes over the teeth next where it touches one of the fangs that nips at the skin. His gaze drifts on Taehyung's. “Felt something odd, on your neck,” Jungkook says in-between two rapid breaths.

Jungkook surveys the spot.

His eyes widen.

Taehyung has no care for whatever it is that bewilders Jungkook. Instead, his tongue drags across his lower lip to collect the remnants of blood there. All he wants is to burrow his teeth in the neck again, and he intends to do so but Jungkook interrupts him.

“Taehyung, you… You have scales.”

Taehyung blinks a few times to chase the blur in his vision, all in vain.

“You have white scales. Right here.”

A jolt of bliss shoots through Taehyung's body when fingertips brush upon a spot at the curve of his shoulder.

He jerks away from Jungkook to slam a hand over his own neck.

Taehyung can feel the skin there. It’s silkier and hardened, rough on the ridges. “Fuck." Both a searing cold and hot bucket submerges him.

“Has this ever happened before?”

Taehyung shakes his head. He does not quite feel like himself, out of it and dazed, and it's heightened when he peers at the raw, bleeding *wound* near Jungkook's throat.

Taehyung's nails carve crescents into his palm to fight off the impulse to dive in again.

He stills when Jungkook approaches him.

Jungkook's gaze is curious, but it has an edge to it that Taehyung swallows under. When he walks forward, Taehyung is the one to backtrack until his back meets the wall.

Jungkook tugs Taehyung's hand aside, his own hovering in its place. "Can I?"

Taehyung nods, thoughts haywire and pants loud in the air, even if he doesn't understand why he's so breathless.

Jungkook's palm sprawls beneath Taehyung's vest. "Your heart is beating fast," he observes, as though his hand isn't inching closer to the tender spot on Taehyung's neck.

Taehyung seizes Jungkook's hips and represses the shudder that tears through him when fingertips graze the scales in a feather-light touch. They send pleasant prickles down his spine, trailed by a wave of goosebumps.

Jungkook hums, his index drawing a circle on the scales. It strokes along the shoulder, then down the collarbones, passing by the throat that it caresses, and Taehyung can *feel* the way more scales blossom behind its heated path. "Are they sensitive?"

"I… Uhm…" Taehyung's head lolls forward, the view before him a nebulous red shape. He mumbles an answer, but he's not certain it makes any sense.

Jungkook emits an amused noise. He cradles Taehyung's nape and lets his thumb knead the scales at the base of Taehyung's throat.

A curse escapes Taehyung. His head drops on Jungkook's shoulder, mind so hazy that he wonders if he might fall unconscious. Jungkook's lips brush upon the scales, and this time Taehyung can't quell the next tremor that rattles down his legs and up his scalp, raising the hair on his nape.

Taehyung had never known his scales could be present in human self this way, let alone be so *sensitive,* where the simple feel of Jungkook's warm breath cascading on them, accompanied by the sound of a kiss, elicits another tide of goosebumps.

Even with something unexpected like this, *Jungkook does so well,* Taehyung thinks in awe, carefully lapping at the open wound he has left on Jungkook.

He breathes in the sweet metallic scent, basking in its taste when he catches a drop of blood with his tongue while Jungkook plays with the scales. Taehyung internally shrinks when he imagines someone else being so close to his vital point, but it's Jungkook.

Everything is alright with Jungkook.

Everything feels so good*,* even when nails gently scrape atop the scales.

Taehyung needs something else, though. He wants to say as much, however the words don't quite come out, whether in his mind, or past his lips. His body, however, moves before he can understand

himself.

His right hand lowers to Jungkook's naked thigh that it cups and grips. It slides along the flesh in a scrape of his nails, passing over the undergarment and slipping beneath the dress that rides up. It halts at the lower back, touching the bareness and pressing his arm against it.

Taehyung emits a shaky sigh, and…

There.

Right there.

Warm.

Silky and soft.

Supple where he kneads the waist.

Much, *much* better, so much so that a constant tremor thrums in his chest now that his craving has been appeased.

"You're rumbling."

Taehyung hums, head fogged. Whispers of the damned float in Taehyung's mind, fierce and ravenous. He's certain Jungkook would taste heavenly if Taehyung were to consume him whole, keep him safe in his chest where no harm would reach him, where no one would see him, hear him, touch him, aside from Taehyung himself.

Could've done better, Taehyung distractedly muses and continues to drag his lips on the wound. It's messy. Not as pretty as it should be. It's not every day he gets to hoard something so precious for himself. He should've made it prettier.

But he'll have the chance to leave another one, right?

Taehyung's fingers tighten around Jungkook.

He'll get to capture Jungkook again, hunt properly this time, as Taehyung has been taught to. Jungkook would make it difficult to catch him. He'd put up a fight, Taehyung thinks, his nails scratching along the two dimples on Jungkook's lower back as his eyes glaze over.

"I think some people might come here if we don't leave," Jungkook suddenly says. He even begins to step away from Taehyung.

Taehyung seizes Jungkook's wrist.

However Jungkook resists and frees himself seconds later, to Taehyung's contentment.

Of course he does.

Jungkook steps backward. "We should head back inside," Jungkook carries on and Taehyung follows after him as Jungkook reclines against the balcony's glass door.

Taehyung’s head tilts to the side. His fingers twitch when Jungkook pushes on the door’s handle and swings it open. Taehyung’s hand deftly chases ahead, to seize Jungkook and refrain him from running away into the ballroom. However Jungkook does anything but that.

Instead, Jungkook slips to the side and races toward the balcony’s railing.

A pleased chuckle floats toward Taehyung as he stumbles forward.

An electric energy begins to buzz in the air, a stormy bubble stripped from any discipline.

Taehyung’s gaze snaps to the right.

Jungkook has his back to him as he runs toward the railing. His palms plant on its surface, about to leap over it regardless of the height.

Taehyung is swift when he pushes on his feet.

He clutches the side of Jungkook’s waist seconds later. He yanks hard enough for Jungkook to tumble backward and fall right against Taehyung, caught anew.

Taehyung twists an arm behind Jungkook while his other one snakes over the navel to crawl up the chest and snatch the jaw, fingertips roughly pressing against the jawbone. “Haven’t you learned to not turn your back on danger?”

Jungkook’s laugh rings in the air, taunting and *mean.* He manages to angle his head away, enough for their gazes to lock on each other. “Danger?” It’s only then that Taehyung feels the sharp point of a dagger nudging at his throat.

“How did you get—”

“It was fastened around the thigh you did not fondle.”

Taehyung has the decency to glower at the answer.

He’s about to reply when a voice interrupts him.

“Jungkook.”

Taehyung’s teeth clench so hard he worries they might shatter under the pressure. Even the lingering taste of Jungkook’s blood isn’t enough to stifle the unadulterated ire that swathes him.

Taehyung wants no one around Jungkook. Not when Taehyung has just come out triumphant of his capture. Not when Taehyung has yet to claim what is his. Not when he has yet to get rid of any—

“Your friend Jimin is telling me what happened is normal, but there’s nothing normal nor *sane* about—”

“I’m well, Ian,” Jungkook interjects.

Taehyung releases his hold around Jungkook to brace himself against the railing, Jungkook trapped between both, back to Taehyung's chest. The stone crackles beneath the clutch of Taehyung's fingers. He can’t afford to completely ruin what he and Jungkook have worked toward. He can’t bring to fruition the scarlet fantasy that paints his vision.

“He hurt you. He threw this— This invisible thing at you,” Christian carries on.

“We’re fine,” Jungkook says and turns his head.

“We have warlocks here. Even a chaos dragon can be subdued if one hurts you, and he has.”

Jungkook huffs as he faces forward again.

Taehyung shakes, this time for another reason. “Tell him to leave if you don’t want his head on your lap.”

“But you make it sound so inviting,” Jungkook murmurs back.

“*Jungkook*.” Taehyung swallows around the staccato that rises in his throat, the bloodthirst a second away from slipping out of his control. “Tell him to leave."

“Christian, leave us, please.”

“But—”

“*Leave.*” Jungkook’s timber is sharp and decisive.

Taehyung isn’t sure of what happens next, however he feels Jungkook move, then hands that cups his face.

“He’s gone. It’s just us.”

Taehyung exhales as the painful tenseness in his body alleviates. When Jungkook caresses the scales on his neck, what remnants of tension left in his body dissipates. “Fuck.”

Jungkook straightens Taehyung’s head up. He wipes the sweat off Taehyung’s face, Taehyung only realizing now how hot and exhausted his body abruptly feels. “Are you okay?”

Taehyung slumps against Jungkook. “Apparently took this much effort to not move.”

Jungkook has the audacity to laugh, and he laughs even more when Taehyung weakly nibbles his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” Jungkook chuckles. “I didn’t realize you were this mad.” He touches more of the scales then says “Is it nice?”

“Yeah… Feels good,” Taehyung says through a little shiver.

“As much as I’d love to stay here forever, we should really head back inside, even more since people saw our… spectacle, I suppose.”

“I know.” Taehyung reclines with a sigh. He cards his unhurt hand through his damp hair, then he takes Jungkook’s wrist to lead him away from the broken railing. “I need to freshen up, and clear my head, so that I don’t do something that’ll throw me in Bastille.”

“Wait.” Jungkook halts them near the glass door, his back to it. “Are they watching?”

Taehyung looks behind Jungkook.

Plethora of glances are thrown at them, however they're more concerned and curious rather than judgmental, nothing that requires any pretense of kisses. He's about to say as much when he sees Christian, the latter glaring in their direction, face pinched around a worried frown.

"Yeah," Taehyung rasps and peers at Jungkook, ignoring the way Christian frees his arm from Jimin's grasp to march toward them. "They are."

"Okay," is all that Jungkook says before he tips his head to kiss Taehyung. He presses himself closer, encasing Taehyung's neck and clutching the back of the vest.

Jungkook seems to particularly enjoy this kiss, for lack of a better word.

He emits those sounds that float to Taehyung's ears: soft sighs, slow inhalations, an aborted hum when Taehyung accidentally nips at a lip. It shouldn't bother Taehyung as much as it does, that Jungkook likes to kiss, however his thoughts derail onto a thorny path.

Jungkook is clearly not opposed to romantic relationships and what they encompass, that much is evident.

Would Jungkook search for a partner to kiss under no pretense? Will he eventually grow tired of Taehyung's affection? What if he does not wish to wait anymore? What if the fare Taehyung gives him does not sustain him anymore? Would he look for someone else, then?

Taehyung remembers telling Jungkook that he would not care if the latter were to discreetly date outside of their wedding.

He regrets ever saying that.

Taehyung could never handle seeing Jungkook with another man like this, to see another man's presence on Jungkook, to witness Jungkook's scent be tainted by someone else's.

They aren't mates, but Taehyung cups the back of Jungkook's head to tilt it more to the side and kiss him better when he catches an increasingly rancid whiff.

This time, it's purposeful when his teeth gnaw on Jungkook's lower lip, and the response is the same, albeit louder as the sound curls in the quiet air, sighed for anyone to hear. Jungkook's lips are soft when Taehyung captures one of them with his own, no flavor of any kind present in the lipstick. They part for a moment, enough for Jungkook to hum in the kiss. His mouth closes for a second. Then he emits a light wince before he dives in again.

The hint of something metallic greets Taehyung.

He breaks the kiss again.

His thumb presses then pulls at the corner of Jungkook's mouth and when it opens at the mute demand, Taehyung catches the faint cut on the inner side of the right cheek where a scarlet bead rolls down.

"Tae, can—"

Taehyung's tongue slips past Jungkook's lips before he can stop himself.

The taste of blood suffuses his bud as he swallows Jungkook's whine, their mouths sealing together. When they part again, their tongues meet in the ghost of a stroke, sharing this metallic tang that Taehyung elicits again when he nips Jungkook's lower lip.

Jungkook shakily inhales, nose bumping Taehyung's, and Taehyung uses this opportunity to deepen the kiss again. It becomes a little more open and heavier, a little more passionate and breathless as he gorges onto this taste that is so very *Jungkook.* Taehyung's mouth slowly glides against Jungkook's damp one, ghosting the lower lip with his tongue before allowing it to invade Jungkook's mouth once more, and a sighed sound escapes Taehyung when a tendril of bliss crawls down his spine from where Jungkook caresses the scales.

Taehyung should pull away.

He should stop.

This goes beyond anything they have discussed.

Yet all he can do is embrace Jungkook ever so tightly, tug on a strand of air to prompt an expected gasp from Jungkook, giving Taehyung a better access to his mouth that Taehyung's skims against, teeth grazing upon it.

Kissing Jungkook feels good, it seems.

So, *so good* when Jungkook's teeth bite on Taehyung's lower lip in an eager demand for more, when something wet slides across Taehyung's tongue in a maddening, slow stroke, and when Jungkook greedily explores Taehyung's mouth and grasps onto his hair, the two of them shivering against each other.

It's also a warning.

A reminder to prying eyes that—

The two of them startle away from each other when a clatter echo in the ballroom.

Taehyung's head darts up.

The guests are vacating the ballroom, maids seemingly cleaning a mess of broken glass someone must have made.

Christian is standing near the balcony, back to Taehyung and Jungkook.

"You should speak with him," Taehyung begins and does his best to hide his panting respiration, palpitations thrumming through his limbs. "And clear everything up, so that he does not bother us for the rest of the night."

"Uh? Who?" Jungkook confusedly wonders through his hazy gaze, unknowingly giving Taehyung the selfish yet pleasing answer he wanted to hear.

"Christian."

"Oh." Jungkook looks over his shoulder. "A lot of guests have left." He peers at Taehyung again. "Some are still watching."

Taehyung says nothing.

He’s still quiet when Jungkook kisses him, even when something wet traces his lower lip, even when Jungkook’s tongue shyly chases after Taehyung’s in a fluttering brush. Taehyung responds with a slow stroke of his own, lips finding Jungkook's, because it would be unbecoming to reject him, right? It must be why Taehyung is also the one to deepen the kiss, unable to stop himself from craving more of Jungkook’s taste.

There’s a knock on the window.

“The feast will begin.”

Taehyung and Jungkook break the kiss. Jungkook’s breath is a warm puff against Taehyung’s lips.

A gust of potent pomegranate flies to Taehyung’s nose when Jungkook takes a step back. “You should probably change as well. Your second suit is in the room we left it at.” His lips are reddened and puffy, the slightest bit red where a cut is.

Taehyung nods and averts his gaze. “Yeah. Need to freshen up anyway.” At least the bloodthirst from earlier is gone now, replaced by a confused warmth, and a tingle in his skin and heart. “You stay here and wait for me. Don’t leave with him.”

Jungkook surveys Taehyung with a smile. “Okay.”

Taehyung cradles Jungkook’s face, and he places a chaste kiss on the silky mouth before nuzzling Jungkook’s cheek. “Don’t let him touch you, yeah?” He demands in Jungkook’s ear, but he’s loud enough to command Christian’s attention that he stares at.

“I won’t.”

“Good.”

Taehyung straightens. He fiddles with the collar of Jungkook’s dress, adjusting it to hide the bite mark. He would rather have it on display, but he has done enough of a scene earlier, and he does not want to throw into the trash the work he has put in tonight’s mingling.

“Will it leave a scar?” Jungkook wonders in a whisper.

“If you let it heal naturally, yes.”

Jungkook worries his lower lip between his teeth. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He reaches for Taehyung’s vest that he begins to unbutton. He takes it off to drape it over his own shoulders.

“I’ve sweated in that. Especially earlier,” Taehyung winces with a glance at the damaged railing.

Jungkook shrugs. He brings the lapels close around him and nestles his nose in the collar, peeping up at Taehyung. “I like your scent too.”

Taehyung has to place a hand over his own mouth and look away from Jungkook when his teeth ache.

“Hurry,” Jungkook urges Taehyung.

Taehyung flicks Jungkook's forehead as he trudges past him. He glances at Jungkook's lips. His tongue flattens against the roof of his mouth, the taste of their kiss lingering on it.

Hands shoved in his pants pockets, the cool air of the night freshening his skin, Taehyung makes his way toward the glass door.

Christian is at the doorway.

Technically, there's more than enough space for Taehyung to curve by him, however Taehyung is feeling petty. He halts in front of Christian and waits.

Christian gulps.

Satisfaction coils in Taehyung when Christian steps to the side, and Taehyung walks by.

Jungkook readjusts the vest on his shoulders, thankful for its length that conceals the start of his 'problem' that may be too visible with the dress he's wearing. He has been careful to make sure that Taehyung does not feel it, but there is only so much Jungkook can hide with the light fabric of his garment.

He exhales as he touches his mouth.

His lips still tingle from the kiss, and the heat that had pooled low in his guts flashes again when the ghost of Taehyung's tongue skims in Jungkook's mind.

Taehyung had looked seconds away from consuming him *whole* earlier.

Jungkook couldn't help but think about this one dragonborn tradition. Would Taehyung really agree to have a chase, if Jungkook were to ask? Would he—"

"Are you genuinely alright?" Ian wonders and tears Jungkook out of his daydreaming. "I'm sorry for being so pushy, and if I've overstepped your boundaries, but what happened earlier goes beyond any… Any passion I may have seen from dragonborns. It looked intense and *insane.* It looked like he hurt you. Your cheek."

"Nothing that I didn't want."

Ian's face reddens. "Oh, huh. I see. God." He wipes a hand down his face.

Jungkook discreetly shuffles away from Ian when the latter settles next to him.

"I just… I saw the way he grabbed you by the throat. And how he bled himself? It didn't look as sane as Jimin tried to make it seem to—"

"So what if it is not sane?" Jungkook's gaze bores through Ian. "Who are you to care or judge?" Ian winces and averts his eyes. "Taehyung and I were having fun, testing each other. A draconic *and* me thing, if you will. They like games of hunts and captures, and find delight in blood. So do I."

“I'm sorry. I shouldn’t be commenting on your relationship with him, but I was concerned that he may, uhm, may have… forced what he did to you.”

Jungkook barks out an incredulous laugh.

Right.

‘Forced’.

As if Jungkook has not had to hide the predicament below his navel since the moment he had been slammed against that column.

“Taehyung knows me. He knows what I like, what I want, and need. He’s good to me. The best I could ever wish for. Nothing he has done to me was unwanted. Far from it.”

If anything, it was not enough.

Not rough enough, not painful enough, not bloody and untamed enough.

“He does seem uh, quite… Quite taken by you?” Ian says with a lopsided smile.

“Something like that.”

“I can’t believe I considered testing whether or not there was genuine love between the two of you.”

“Pardon?”

“When I saw you again at the citadel, I may have started developing this ‘puppy love’ again like I had back when we were young,” Ian says with an awkward chuckle. “I had heard a few rumors about your marriage with Taehyung, none that were complimenting, to be honest.”

“Ah, yes. Most likely instigated by Seohyung.”

“The Queen?”

“It’s a long story,” Jungkook dismisses.

“If it’s any reassurance, any doubts I may have had over your arranged union with a dragonborn have vanished after tonight’s events. Pretty sure that’s the case for everyone else. Some weren’t as freaked out as I was. A few human ladies were even quite envious of you, actually. Seems like there’s something attractive about this kind of, uh, beastly display?” Ian grimaces. “But, anyway. I’m sorry. I won’t overstep like I did again. I just wanted to make sure you’re alright, and I wasn't sure if it was okay to leave you alone with him, since I thought he unwillingly hurt you. But seems like there’s nothing unwanted.” He coughs to himself and fiddles with the hoop hooked on his ear. “Is this… Is this really something you enjoy?”

“You may learn to enjoy dragonborns' passion if you were to befriend one."

Ian’s hands raise in the air. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Was that all?” Jungkook asks, eager for Taehyung's return.

“Yep! That was it! Just making sure you weren’t an unwilling participant in whatever happened. But you’re all good, so I’ll dip now before Taehyung comes back,” Ian says and pushes himself off the railing. “Should I apologize to him?”

“I’d advise against speaking to him or I again tonight.”

“Got it. Looked like he was one blink away from twisting my head from my body,” Ian loudly laughs.

Jungkook smiles at him. “Something like that.”

Ian’s eyes widen. His gaze darts around. He draws a tight lip smile and throws a thumb up at Jungkook before scampering out of the balcony.

Barely a minute passes before the sounds of flapping wings elevate behind Jungkook, then heels clacking on the floor.

A hand touches Jungkook’s waist and turns him around. His heart speeds up when he peers at Taehyung’s face, memories of the kiss flickering in his mind again.

Taehyung has adorned his second outfit of the night, a scarlet suit, complete with a few accessories that echo Jungkook's. The chest is well displayed with this new garment, freed from any necklace, all bare for Jungkook to touch and praise.

"We'll have to find some antiseptic ointment for it." Taehyung retrieves a wet handkerchief. He passes it over Jungkook’s neck and throat, cleaning the blood off of it. “Careful to not move the collar too much,” Taehyung says, but Jungkook is distracted by how puffy and pink Taehyung’s lips are, and by the fact that *Jungkook* is the reason behind this. “Or the bite will show.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to hide your marks?”

Taehyung’s mouth opens and closes around a strangled noise. The tip of his ears reddens, as they have a few times tonight, to Jungkook’s surprise. “That mark is too… S’too much. For humans, at least. You’ve seen Christian’s reaction. Noisy, meddling fucker.”

"He meant no harm."

"I don't care." Taehyung tosses the handkerchief over the balcony. "Keep it hidden nonetheless."

Jungkook huffs. At the very least, the dull pain in his neck is there to remind him of what has happened, even if he cannot see it nor pridefully wear it. “Fine.”

“Brat.” Taehyung holds Jungkook’s wrist to pull him out of the balcony. “Need to go to the bathroom?”

Jungkook shakes his head. “I want to eat. I’m hungry.”

“Me too.”

“Haven’t you had your fare already?” Jungkook touches the indent of Taehyung's teeth on his neck.

“Elders.” Taehyung glares at Jungkook, and Jungkook relishes in the way Taehyung, a chaos dragon, *blushes.* “Shut up. It'll never happen again if you’re gonna be insufferable about it.”

“Oh so you were already thinking of the next time? Even when my current mark has yet to heal?” Jungkook hums. “Where will the next one be? On my neck again? Or someone else? Perhaps my thigh. You seem to enjoy its—”

Taehyung lets go of Jungkook to stride ahead of him.

Jungkook bursts into laughter and races after him. “Wait for me!”

“No. Fuck you. And before you say anything else: shut up.”

Jungkook muffles his snickers atop Taehyung’s shoulders, hands curling around the bicep. He does not get the chance to tease Taehyung any further.

Their entrance to the dining room arrives too soon.

Gazes drift on them.

Jungkook notes the shock on the dragonborns’ faces. “What’s going on?” He whispers to Taehyung as they make their way toward the end of a series of lined up, long dining tables, where their places await them.

“They smell blood on you.” Taehyung’s golden eyes roam along Jungkook’s form. “Mine.”

“Good.” Jungkook makes a move to peck Taehyung’s cheek, however he stops himself when a sudden coyness overcomes him.

He and Taehyung have kissed.

Deeply.

With *tongues.*

Jungkook’s tongue has caressed *Taehyung’s.*

Jungkook pushes back this urge to scream and vent and *yell* about this for a later moment, once away from the recipient of his passion.

Jungkook touches Taehyung’s waist when the latter pulls the chair for him. He settles down, Taehyung doing the same on his left who works as a shield against Seohyung and Sungmin that are sitting at the end of the table.

Jimin and Yoongi are installed in front of Taehyung and Jungkook, and Jimin wiggles his brow at Jungkook, punctuating the motion with a wink.

Seohyung rises up, tapping a spoon against a glass to command the eyes on her. “Now that the latecomers have arrived,” she starts with a smile that does nothing to conceal the vitriol in her gaze, “the feast shall begin.”

Chapter End Notes

DISCLAIMER: SLB IS N O T sad OR open ending at all, it will have a very happy ending, it seems I need to clarify this because the prompt that inspired this story may have been confusing XDDD

Hope you enjoyed this chapter, it was very fun to write 👀 Been checking off a lot of first times writing wise with SLB, and in this chap it was the whole dancing ball and dancing scene XD And the balcony scene afterwards 👁️👄👁️ never wrote prey/predator and I'm having lots of fun exploring this dynamic bshagvs I believe this chap was my FAAAAAAAAAAV to write ever, overpassed any other chap, I had just a blast with idk was so so much fun T_____T

Taekook are progressing even more 👀 There will be a bit more of taejelly regarding Ian, and I'm very excited for that ngl I have been WAITING for it fr, taejelly is so fun to write 😭 I also can't wait to write more of a sultry, flirty koo, he knows his power over tae, and he will certainly use it 👀

Thank you so much again for reading and commenting if you do 🤳🤍

PS: for the whole dress changing thing, all I can say is this

— Chapter's visuals —

Jungkook's outfit for the dancing ball
Taehyung's outfit for the dancing ball
Jungkook's outfit for the feast
Taehyung's outfit for the feast

Jimin's outfit for the dancing ball
Jimin's outfit for the feast
Yoongi's outfit for both (he is n o t wearing two fits)

End Notes

I hope you're enjoying this monster of a story that is growing more and more every day that passes!! Comments are always highly appreciated and a huge motivation on any or every chapter so please don't hesitate to leave some and be kind hehe, thank you so much for reading this chapter if you have and plenty of kisses to your sweet bums 🤍

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